SOVIET SHORT STORIES

1944

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Life and Literature in the Soviet Union
edited by
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FOREWORD

★

WELL, HERE is the third of an annual succession of volumes of Soviet Short Stories in our series: Soviet Life and Letters.

May it, like its predecessors, help to make several thousand readers more familiar with the way the Soviet people to-day think and feel.

Some of the writers here represented—Simonov and Gorbatov, for example—are already well-known in this country. Dovzhenko is better known as a film director—film fans will find his writing as passionately imbued with lyricism and as racy with the peasant characters of his native Ukraine as his screen-work "Earth" and "Shchors", etc. Other of the writers here are newcomers.

A single tone runs through all the stories, indeed through all contemporary Soviet story writing. It is a mood of exaltation. The characters are not giants, they are simple, ordinary people, who grow to the stature demanded of them by events, endure with calm, manifest themselves unbreakable.

The mood is heroic, but combined with the characteristic Russian realism and closeness to life. The young girl guerillas who are so brave are also desperately afraid, and it is as much a surprise to them as to anybody else to find that they are heroines. The differences between the older and younger generations are also brought out with particular insight and imagination, especially in the two stories "The Birthday" and "White Mittens".

For the young, the horror of war is mitigated by the sense that they are creating their own future. For the old, much more resignation is needed to make the position bearable: their whole horizon is bounded by the fact that a son is at the front, or has been killed.

In fact, a recurrent theme in the stories is just this relationship between the old and the young, the parents and their Red Army sons and daughters. At the front, all is heroism: but on leave,

the emotion of the family ties is very intense, and the longing to return to a normal life, to wife or mother or girl-friend.

Kaverin is particularly instructive in his depiction of the psychology of the very young Soviet citizen. In "A Simple Lad", the young man, though heroic in war, is pre-occupied with finding somebody to attach himself to: he has no parents. In "The Last Night", another young man, more conscious and literate, decides to take on a suicidal job and spends his last night thinking how very pleasant life has been, and somehow worth dying for. In "Three Meetings", a third very young man, this time a munitions worker, puts all his energy into building up what has been broken—from giving first-aid to a little old professor rescued unconscious from a blitzed building to making a home for three people, all orphans, including himself, a baby child and a girl from a factory. As Kaverin writes "The life of this youth, still almost a boy, passed before me and in his firm tread, the tread of a whole generation, I saw for the first time, the mighty results of the war. The fragments of scattered families were being pieced together and new families were being formed. Following on the heels of grief comes happiness: people are finding each other, and wonderful hopes glow in the eyes of youth".

It is important to understand all this, for it is going to make its mark on the coming history of the world. Soviet literature is helpful toward such an understanding, because it is an integral part of Soviet life. It has done much more than passively reflect the mood of the Soviet people, it has contributed its share toward creating it.

What a Soviet writer himself thinks about it may be read in the first piece included, an essay by the veteran Leningrad poet and author Tikhonov.

I. M. and H. P. J. M.

THE SOVIET WRITER

By NIKOLAI TIKHONOV

★

THE PLACE of the writer in the Soviet patriotic war is determined by the weapon that he wields. That weapon is the written word. In this war our writers have laid down their lives as warriors, and as warriors they have rallied their ranks to champion the unshakable truths of Soviet Art.

Last May Marshal Stalin declared that Soviet intellectuals had enriched Soviet science, technology, culture and art with new and outstanding achievements in the course of the war. And the writers have played their part. From the outset of the war they flocked to take their place in the ranks of the country's defenders. From the very first they furnished words of encouragement and cheer to the Red Army on the battlefront and to the Soviet people fulfilling the tasks of the rear.

Our writers share the life of the people. They hold a place of honour in the fighting brotherhood of the country. Their influence is immense. Never has their responsibility, both to the people now and to future generations, been so great. Soviet literature has become "the conscience of the world", as J. B. Priestley put it, and the phrase is a deserved tribute.

The peoples of the United Nations, the oppressed fighting against fascism, the workers, intellectuals and writers of the West, marvel at the victories of the Soviet people. They ask continuously: how were such miracles accomplished, how have such triumphs been won? They turn to us Soviet writers and say: "Show us this Soviet people. Reveal the secret of their successes. Enable us to see into the heart and soul of the Soviet citizen. Tell us all you know about him with all the power of your untrammelled art—you writers and poets, engineers of the human soul, who understand the full and deep significance of the events through which you and your country are passing."

Our Soviet people and our Red Army eagerly absorb the words of our writers. They draw from them moral strength, they draw inspiration from the feats of the heroes of whom they read. "To be an engineer of the human soul means to stand with both feet planted in the realities of life", said Zhdanov at the opening of the first Writers' Congress. This saying retains its force in the days through which we are now living. It should not be understood narrowly. The facts operating to-day surround us, but we are influenced also by knowledge of the future of which these facts are harbingers. We are influenced, too, by a profound consciousness of the historical past of our people. Within us lives the immortal ideal of perfecting human character, an ideal which has reached so amazing a fruition in our present—the Stalin—epoch, a period that has given us people worthy of comparison with, and often even surpassing, the finest heroes of classic times.

The scale of the struggle of our people to-day surpasses the gigantic collisions that in the past decided the fate of the world. Prior to the war the central figure of Soviet literature was the builder of the new life in the town and on the collective farm—the man supremely devoted to the cause of the Party, the business manager or engineer engaged in great construction projects, the explorer conquering the Arctic, the Young Pioneer, tireless and eager for knowledge and dwelling in the romantic world of happy childhood. Now this same individual is passing through the furnace of war, undergoing terrible ordeals and performing deathless feats of valour.

We are witnessing the supreme heroism and the supreme triumph of the Soviet citizen. How is this hero of a nation depicted in our literature? In the days of war, as formerly in the days of peaceful construction, the hero of our literature is Truth. We have no desire to conceal either drastic retreats or cruel battles, nor the immense exertions put forth by our country on its road to victory. We have no desire to cloak our soldiers and officers in the glittering gear of the knights of fable, nor to limit ourselves to baldly objective battle pictures. The truth about war is a story capable of stirring the soul to its depths and dis-

closing all the moral wealth and depth of the mighty soul of the Soviet citizen. Unconquerable resolve, amazing endurance, iron fortitude, profound understanding of what is happening, and an exalted sense of duty—these are the characteristic features of the Soviet soldier, the Soviet woman, the Soviet child, the Soviet veteran. Our hero knows no limits of age or sex.

* * *

The national pride which had previously lain hidden in the heart of the Soviet citizen blazed into bright flame in the face of mortal peril and the threat of enslavement. Amid the ruins of Stalingrad and in beleaguered Leningrad, wherever the gigantic battles were fought, the Soviet citizen at the decisive hour breathed the breath of this national pride and sacrificed his life for his country and its future. In the course of the bitter fighting he conceived a hatred for the Germans—a deep and inextinguishable hatred that acted as a driving force for the Red Army and the entire Soviet people.

As the war progressed our soldiers changed. The Red Army took unto itself the sons of all the nations of the Soviet Union, and war became the purpose of their life. They grew up in the fire of battle, and they have grown to such a stature that the flame of their victories illumines the whole world with the glow of the dawn of the salvation of all nations from the yoke of the declining Herrenvolk.

Never before have Soviet writers had such readers as those of to-day. Never have their words been absorbed so eagerly. And never before have they been of such help to people. All the processes of the war are in one manner or another reflected in our literature. That is its credit, honour and glory. It has not reflected them sufficiently exhaustively or sufficiently forcefully, but it has reflected them in accordance with the measure of the talent that exists in our ranks to-day.

It is impossible to list all the works by our authors, poets, dramatists, and scenarists devoted to the war. We will, however, run through those of greatest interest and which have won most general recognition.

It must be admitted that, in the first days of the war, our best writers did not know how to begin. They felt instinctively, however, that their responsibilities demanded that they focus their energies on searching for the most essential, that is, for Truth. Is it not significant that such differing personalities as Kolosov and Pavstovsky, on leaving for the front, each took with them a copy of Leo Tolstoy's *Tales of Sebastopol.*

Why did they choose Tolstoy? Because in Tolstoy's *Tales*, in which fine writing and journalism are combined, the living truth goes hand in hand with the author's reflection of what he saw. Tolstoy saw with his own eyes what he described. But this did not suffice him. He was moved with an impelling urge to understand the Russian soul, and he did not describe what he saw objectively, but with the passion of a patriot sharing in the national effort.

In these grim times our Soviet writers could take no other course than see everything for themselves and tell about it truthfully. Take a young author like Konstantin Simonov. His popularity is immense. In the art of writing, as in every other field, it is inevitable that generation should succeed generation. Simonov is the voice of the younger generation of to-day, the generation that has been through Kharkov, that took part in the liberation of Western White Russia and the Western Ukraine, that tasted the bitter Finnish war of winter 1939-40.

To this generation fell the honour of taking part in the great war of the Soviet people against the German fascist invaders. Youth is gifted with immense energy and not afraid to expend its strength. So we find Simonov exercising himself in every branch of literature. He is prose writer, critic, poet, playwright, scenarist—all in one. Distance holds no terrors for him. He is one day in Odessa, the next near Moscow; at one moment he is traversing the snowy wastes of the Arctic, at the next, lo and behold, he is in Stalingrad. We hear of him on the right bank of the Dnieper, in the forests of Polessye, then a moment later we open our newspapers and read his dispatches from Gomel. This definance of distance is a part of the energy of youth.

His thirst for first-hand impressions is entirely legitimate. He

goes out himself on reconnaissance, participates in attacks. You may find him in an observation post, or on a ferry across the Volga. He is under fire everywhere, and sincere and plain-spoken. He has no conceit, no trace of pose, no florid or ornate phrases. He was the first in this war to put the theme of the Russian people on the stage. He made no special discovery—these people were all around him, the army is full of them. But he was the first to delineate them. And he deserves credit for it.

Simonov has written verse that soldiers and officers carry next their hearts. This is not an exaggeration. They do so because his verses correspond to what is in their hearts and they are grateful to the author. The favourite is *Wait for Me*, a love poem, but there are poems of another type also. These were posted up on walls in beleaguered Leningrad in letters a yard high. They are poems of hate—such an one was *Kill Him*!

Simonov writes sketches that are like short stories and short stories that are like sketches. He is not interested in fidelity to a genre—what interests him is struggle and victory. He speaks with the language of his times. His generation is in the trenches, in the battle—it is winning the war, and when it thinks of war, it thinks of Simonov. That is a good deal.

There are of course shortcomings in his short stories, poems and plays. But that is not the important thing. The important thing is that he is a voice of his generation. He cannot write faultlessly. That may come with time. But, just as he is, he marks his stories and verses with the dates 1941, 1942, 1943. Those are glorious dates. They will never be forgotten.

* * *

Or take Sobolev's *Sailor's Soul*.[1] These are passionate little stories, the merit of which lies in the circumstance that they read like truth. They are stamped with the truth about our pride and glory, the Soviet seamen who are reviving the glorious traditions of the past. He gives us Seaman Kostya under a new name. He

[1] This name of a collection of Sobolev's sketches is taken by him from the popular name of the striped jersey characteristic of Soviet sailors, often retained by them as a distinguishing mark even for land fighting.

gives us Sebastopol beset by storm and tempest, our own Soviet Sebastopol—at a moment when Nakhimov[1] has turned over his post to a Soviet girl and looks on with pride as his successor fulfils her historic duty. Kornilov's[1] sailors come to life again in an inimitable sketch of Sebastopol's naval batteries. Istomin's sappers are resurrected as the sappers of the year 1942. Sobolev's merit lies in the fact that he has succeeded in conveying the pulse-beat of the struggle.

Our war-time literature includes, however, also attempts which go beyond mere episodes. It is a very difficult thing at the height of a war like that of to-day to endeavour to halt the march of time long enough to employ a full-length canvas. It is easy to make sketches in one's notebook, but it is far harder to paint a big picture during a momentary halt at Time's cross-roads. Nevertheless Vasily Grossman's novel *The People Immortal* is a success. This is not because of his creation of the characters Commissar Bogaryov and Red Army man Ignatyev—typical though they be. Grossman tackled something else, something bigger than the creation of individual characters, something that here appears in literature for the first time.

The war has affected the whole life of our people and everything that they hold dear. Grossman was the first to depict this entire gamut of war, the first to describe the perishing of entire towns and villages in the squall of the enemy invasion. He offends us with no trite exaggerations. He refrains from insulting true heroes with false heroes. There are defects in his novel, certainly, but it is of greater significance to recognise the main thing that the writer tried to do and which he succeeded in achieving.

Gorbatov's *Taras's Family* made a tremendous impression on readers both at the front and in the rear. It is a tradition that literary standards of judgment should be severe. It is the duty of writers to stand sentinel over art and to make high demands on one another. But there are phenomena in literature, as in every art, which cannot properly be evaluated if one carries the search for the irreproachable too far. Take, for example, Nikolai

[1] Heroes of the 1854-5 siege.

Ostrovsky's two books[1] (we shall have more to say of them presently in relation to the present war). They are far from being as free from fault as the exacting artist would wish, but they are splendid books. So also with Gorbatov's story. More powerful books will be written, books which will more fully portray the facets of life under the Germans in our dear and unhappy Ukraine. But Gorbatov put the passion of an ardent journalist into his story, and the book achieved its purpose. The author attained his aim. People have accepted his story as he intended it.

Sholokhov has started work on a novel *They Fought for their Country*. As yet it is available only in the form of fragments, and it is hard to visualise it as a whole, because we cannot yet perceive the development of the characters. But it is already evident that Sholokhov has conceived a difficult task. It is not in his character to have wanted an easy one. The book is about the workaday life of war. About the distressful days of retreat, when the soldier felt that people looked upon him, their defender, almost with contempt, and raging fury awoke in his heart. We know now that later this fury wes to lead to the triumphs of Stalingrad, Orel, Kiev, Leningrad. It is part of the truth of war.

Sholokhov wrote a piece called *The Science of Hatred*. Who dares say that this was no more than a newspaper sketch? *The Science of Hatred* was read by our whole army and by our armed people.

Wanda Wassilewska's *Rainbow* gives with precise and consistent accuracy a picture of the rule of the Germans in that part of our territories which temporarily fell under their sway—a picture that is almost beyond the power of the pen. The author dissects the suffering of the people almost anatomically. Her pen becomes a scalpel. She selects the factual without any intervention on the part of virtuous imagination. She rejects the yardstick of art in order to make her picture as remorseless an an indictment, in order to punish the butchers as though by a sentence of the court.

[1] *The Making of a Hero* and *The Birth of the Storm*, novels (fictional-autobiographical) of the Civil War in the Ukraine and of the Ukrainian struggle against Polish and German invaders after the last war.

She does this deliberately—she does not tone down and she does not argue, but strives to depict the most terrible and the most essential. She aims to achieve the idea and content of the story as it has entered the consciousness of the reader both at the front and in the rear. Only persons soaked in a spirit of unadulterated aestheticism can complain that the book has not been written in accordance with the laws they are used to. For, be it borne in mind, the Germans are not living or fighting in accordance with the laws by which it has been customary to depict character in literature in the past.

We see the same phenomena in the field of drama. The immense social value of Alexander Korneichuk's *The Front* is generally acknowledged. Even when the theme he treats has become antiquated, the play will live as a thing of history.

The individuality characteristic of every independent writer is displayed in choice of theme. Leonid Leonov has a particular hero, a kind of superfluous person, who wanders from novel to novel, from play to play. In *Invasion* he could not have chosen any other path for him—he made this hero sacrifice himself in a worthy cause. There is nothing strained in this—it is the truthful end to the life of such a character also, as may be observed in uncounted instances in these days, especially in enemy-occupied territory.

The same thing exactly happens to the characters in the very fine tales of Platonov. His stories always suffered from a superfluity of odd individuals, and now these odd personages begin, in his war stories, to live a life that is in no way odd. And the influence of Jack London, elusively sensed in the tales of Kozhevnikov, now no longer lessens the impression they produce. Why? Because the strong characters that we recognise from the works of Jack London are not simply transplanted as literary imitations, but live in our contemporary environment independently.

In Vishnevsky's play *At the Walls of Leningrad* the sailors, are "bratishki" (little brothers) of the days of the Civil War. But this is entirely legitimate. Those who happened to be in Leningrad during the siege will remember that once again the streets of the great city saw sailors girdled and criss-crossed with

machine-gun belts, looking like reincarnations of types out of the film *We from Kronstadt*.[1] The Baltic Fleet is proud of its traditions and the sailors of to-day went out in the spirit of those who once withstood Yudenich tanks armed only with hand grenades, when they won from the Germans—not without reason—the sobriquet of "Black Devils".

* * *

Thus we see our writers keeping pace with the events that are bound up with the life of our people in arms, who need the writer's words, have faith in him and read him eagerly.

The *Vasily Tyorkin* of Tvardovsky is not the same Vasya Tyorkin of the days of the Mannerheim Line with his appearance restricted to the army newspaper *Na Strazhye Rodiny*. Tvardovsky has too great an esteem for the language of the people to repeat these sometimes too hackneyed verses that enshrined the Vasya Tyorkin who fought as a Red Army man on the Karelian Isthmus. Now, in free and untrammelled verse-chapters, *Vasily Tyorkin* shows us the Red Army man of to-day—the modest, gallant rank-and-filer possessed of all the native wisdom of the people—entering into the life and death struggle against fascism.

There is one thing, however, that the poem *Tyorkin* lacks. The Russian who to-day upholds the liberty of his land, arms in hand, has preserved all the innate qualities of his warrior forefathers of old. But new qualities have been added to these, in the modern Soviet citizen, and these new qualities are only partially depicted in Tvardovsky's poem. That which the poet has treated as a general image could have been more complete and profound had it been enriched with these new lines—in that way it would have remained forever for future generations as a splendid poetic image of a great era.

We are now absorbed in war. Everything else is of minor importance, if not alien. What is the poet to give in these grim times? He does not even ask. He knows what he has to do and where he has to be. How could it be otherwise? Belinsky[2] was profoundly right when he said: "If the man's a poet, a true poet,

[1] Civil war defence of Leningrad, scenario by Vishnevsky.

[2] Nineteenth century critic.

then he must feel with his country, share its hopes, suffer its ailments, rejoice with its joys." Hence we may ask: Can a Russian poet be anything but a Russian poet, Russian not only by birth, but in spirit and cast of mind, in mould of feeling, no matter how deeply he may be impregnated with "Europeanism".

When speaking, therefore, of the artistic growth of our poetry in the period of the war, it should be noted that a poet like Surkov, who had always hitherto preferred content to form, has now begun to write more effectively and has produced a number of good things. Prokofiev, who used to write only verse and song, has written a striking poem *Russia.* Vera Inber, whose sin had always been aestheticism, wrote in the midst of the grim siege of Leningrad a poem called *Pulkovo Meridian* that is, in its way, a diary in which she has striven to record the sombre picture of a winter-beleaguered city. Olga Bergholz has revealed unexpected power in her *February Diary,* with which the whole country is familiar. Here we find that awakening, that inspiring action of the tide of truly great feeling without which real poetry cannot exist.

In these days of war, certain of the most ancient forms of poetry, which one would have thought things only of the past, have been revived. In olden times bards accompanied warriors to battle and composed their songs in the midst of the combat, extolling the heroes who had fallen and summoning the living to vengeance. And to-day we have a splendid poem by Pavel Antokolsky, *Son,* of which the initiated say that it is the song of a bard beside the grave of his warrior son who has died for his country. Yet the poem is not an epitaph. It is a real fragment of life. The poem belongs not only to its author but to all who have suffered deep personal bereavement.

In contrast, when Aliger, in her poem *Zoya,*[1] speaks in the name of her generation, is she not entitled to do so. Perhaps Zoya was not quite as she is depicted, and some stanzas are at variance with the facts of Zoya's biography. But Zoya loses nothing essential, her essence is there, and thereby by means of

[1] About Zoya Kosmodemyanskaya ("Tanya"), a young guerrilla girl, executed by the Germans.

the poem the chief and most valuable thing is portrayed—boundless love for the Soviet motherland, for whose sake Zoya lived her noble life and died her noble death.

The poetry of our enemy has only one theme—malignant hatred of humanity. It is not for nothing that Dietrich Eckhardt is the acknowledged poet of Hitler Germany, and that for his sake the Lessing Prize was abolished and the Lessing School renamed the Dietrich Eckhardt School. He is fond of harping in his lines on ever one and the same word "storm, storm, storm". By this, of course, he means the storm of fascism, supposed to be sweeping the world. Poverty-stricken poetry! How much richer is our world, how much richer are our citizens in the demands they make of the arts!

The voices of the poets from all the regions of our broad country have merged into, as it were, one great polyphonic chorus singing the glory of the motherland. But listen and you will discover every distinction and every shade—Rylsky, Tychina, Bazhan, Pervomaisky, Shchipachov, Isakovsky, Yakob Kolos, Perets Markish, Naira Zaryan and others.

In a poem by the Uzbek poet Gafur Gulyam *I am Coming from the East*, you will find echoes of the mighty poetry of Mayakovsky, and a deep sense of the times that enables this Uzbek poet to amaze his countrymen by the power of his verse and astonish the whole Soviet people by the breadth of his themes.

The poems of Kuleshov are things for the whole Union although they are written in White Russian. His *The Standard of the Brigade* unites with an epic quality of theme an abundance of lyrical lines of wonderful unexpectedness.

And two of our poets have achieved a work which is not only of direct significance to the whole Soviet Union but actually of State importance. The words of the National Anthem, written by Mikhalkov and El-Registan, are written so simply that nothing ponderous disturbs the stark formulations designed to be comprehensible to all the ages, to all the peoples, and to all the tribes of our country. All poetic ornament and everything that might hamper starkness of meaning are rejected.

Scores of poets of all nationalities of the Soviet Union submitted competitive texts for the anthem, and this noble emulation demonstrated more clearly than anything else that our poets have a sense and understanding of civic duty.

Friendship among the Stalin family of nations has never shone so brilliantly as in these days of the great patriotic war. The unity of the nations is being cemented by the blood of the battlefields. Poets and writers of all nationalities are fighting in the same ranks. The Azerbaidzhanian Abul Hassan fought at Sebastopol, and now writes stories of the wonderful defence of that city. The Tatar poet Faizi took part in the defence of Leningrad. The Kazakh poet Abdullah Dzhumgaliyev fell fighting near Moscow and a song has been written in his honour by the soldier-poet Amanzhalov. Hero of the Soviet Union Malik Gabdulin has written a book of sketches entitled *My Front-line Comrades.* Dzhambul's[1] poem *My Children—the People of Leningrad* was an inspiration to its citizens in the blackest days of the siege; they rejoiced in the poem as a fraternal greeting from the breadth of their motherland: We must be strong and united, if there, on the slopes of the mountains, the people of Kazakhstan are thinking of Leningrad and singing it songs of cheer.

The fame of the Panfilov heroes[2] spread all over the Union. Poems have been written to the heroic twenty-eight in Russian, Kazakh and Yiddish. Azuyev wrote a play on them called *The Honour of the Guards*, and Mukanov one, *Guards, Forward!*

A play has been written in Kazakhstan on the theme of Kazakh and Ukrainian guerrillas fighting shoulder to shoulder in the Kiev district. The poets, Upits, Cvirka and Subrabkalns add voices from the Baltic. Said Ordubadi, the oldest Azerbaidzhanian prose writer, has written a novel about young chemists in the war. A fresh young writer in Georgia, Grigory Abashidze, has produced a poem *Victory Mountain.* All Georgia is singing Chancharauli's *The Sun will Shine over our Country.* Patriotic enthusiasm pervades the verse of Lenidze.

[1] Famous and venerable Kazakh bard.

[2] Who died to hold enemy tanks on the road to Moscow.

The voices of young and old merge in hymns to the leader of our people. The songs and poems written during the war in all languages to our great Stalin are numberless.

The war is inspiring writers in the far South and in the far North. Literary forms are expanding. Poets such as Bazhan, Golovanivsky, Pervomaisky, become journalists, are writing sketches and articles. Narrative writers—Panch and Kopylenko in the Ukraine, for example—are turning into satirists. Veterans like Aini and Avetik Isakyan have found new youth in writing about the war. The poets and prose writers of all the nationalities, living witnesses of the people's woe and the people's triumph, constitute a fighting brotherhood in which the outstanding influence is Russian literature, a natural and beneficent influence that enriches the literature of the sister nationalities. Gafur Gulyam's work, already mentioned, is a clear illustration. A poet informed by all the secrets of oriental tradition and all the great poets of the past, he borrows from Mayakovsky so that his own verse may strike a new note to the readers of his mother tongue.

* * *

All nationalities of the Soviet Union contribute to the number of those fighting at the front. The army includes workers and intellectuals, young and old, Russians, Ukrainians, White Russians, Georgians, Kazakhs. They value the words of writers as they never valued them before. But they do not value any words—cold, indifferent, rapid, garish words they reject. If propaganda is bad, it is not propaganda. A leaflet, to be needed, has to be written from the heart. It is therefore no disgrace to an author to write a leaflet, so long as he writes one that nobody else could write.

And the men at the front are interested in books, too, as well as leaflets—keenly interested. In General Gorbatov's army Nikolai Ostrovsky's *The Making of a Hero* became a sort of evangel. How it began nobody knows. But the novel was read and re-read in every company and battalion. There was once almost a fight between two units on the question of whose turn it was to read the book. One claimed priority because it had

killed so many Germans. "But we killed more than you did", protested the other. "So you should, there are more of you", replied the first, refusing to give way. The commanders even started referring to the new recruits as "Korchagins"[1] But the title had to be earned. The book took such a hold on the men's imaginations that once, when a company had almost been surrounded and had succeeded in fighting its way out, one Red Army man said after the battle: "Phew, that was hot. Seemed to me as though Nikolai Ostrovsky was lying on our right flank behind the machine-gun helping us out."[2]

On the Ukrainian front Shevchenko's *Kobzar*, carefully mended and patched, was solemnly loaned each evening to the man who had most distinguished himself during the preceding day. And men fought for the right to receive the book as though for a high award. We know that an Order of the Day was issued to the second battalion of a glorious guerrilla division, known as "Grandfather's", as follows: "Any piece of newspaper may be used as cigarette paper, with the exception of pieces containing Ehrenburg's articles."

The young author Tevelev wrote a story based upon an actual fact that occurred near Leningrad. It told of a gunner officer who happened to be passing when an enemy shell fell amidst a group of children. He gave first-aid to the wounded youngsters and noted in his notebook the names of the boys and girls killed or injured. When he returned to his battery and issued his commands, he made it a habit to call "Revenge for So-and-So—fire!", mentioning each tiny victim in turn. This story became widely known at the front, and it became a practice, when firing at the Germans, to fire salvoes in revenge for named individuals. It may be imagined with what care and accuracy the gunners fired as they wreaked vengeance for the children of Leningrad.

Books live a life of their own at the front. They are treasured with all the care given to weapons. One division stationed near Pulkovo collected money and sent one of its best educated men

[1] The name of the guerrilla hero of the novel.

[2] Ostrovsky, who is dead, is himself a pattern of courage. As he wrote his two famous novels he was lying disabled and blinded from a wasting paralysis induced by his Civil War wounds.

to Leningrad to buy good books, books of interest to soldiers. When a book was handed out, a record was kept of its condition, written inside the cover. And if the book was returned with a page torn, or soiled or damaged, the offending borrower was liable to be deprived of the right of further reading.

The men at the front like stuff that is written with fire and spirit. That is why Ehrenburg is so unbelievably popular. It is to his supreme credit that he helped to dispel the myth of German fascist invincibility. He helped to expose the brazen and arrogant German of the early months of the war as a rapacious, thieving, stupid and bloodthirsty Fritz. He killed fear of the Germans by exposing the Hitlerites in their true colours.

In this connection should be mentioned also Alexei Tolstoy's articles, Grossman's and Simonov's powerful sketches, the stories of Pavlenko, and the Fadeyev books of sketches that give an excellent picture of Leningrad in 1942.

How did the guerrillas find it possible to use as leaflets the poems of Alexander Prokofiev and of Pavel Antokolsky, two entirely contrasting poets? The former used to be known as a song-writer, the latter as a high-falutin' and rather abstract poet. Yet it turned out that Prokofiev could write vivid propaganda verses with no loss of quality, while Antokolsky's *Ballad of an Unknown Boy* has an appeal that is universal.

And it is not only at the front that prose and poetry has proved its propaganda value. In the cities of Kazakhstan there was held a contest of "akyn", or bards. It lasted seven days. Bards gathered from eight regions. Collective farmers, workers, engineers did their utmost, so that the "akyn" of their districts might have giant achievements to extol and be enabled to carry off the palm at the contest. The gang on an oil derrick that was behind its scheduled output rose to top place after the "akyn" visited their sector.

* * *

The writer is a great influence in our country. His voice accompanies men in battle and spurs them on to victory on the field and at the bench. In order that a writer may make wide use of literary forms he must have a high level of culture and a

developed class consciousness; he must be untiringly devoted to the great ideals of our times. As he works with the inspiration of to-day, the writer of the present gains new insight into our country's past. Hence the great number of historical novels, poems and plays written in recent times. We may mention Alexei Tolstoy's *Road to Calvary* and his *Difficult Years* (a play about Ivan the Terrible); Golubov's *Bagration*, Shishkov's *Yemelyan Pugachev*, a play about Prince Vladimir by Forsh and Boyadzhiyev, Sergeyev-Tsensky's *The Brusilov Offensive*, Antonovskaya's *The Great Muravi*, Borodin's *Dmitri Donskoy*, Aibek's *Navoi*, Samed Vurgun's play *Vagif*, Bazhan's poem about Daniel Galitsky, Hamid Alimdjan's *Mukanna*, Sayanov's poem *Tales of Russian Soldiers*, Rylsky's poem on Bogdan Khmelnitsky, and Kervabayev's *The Years of Decision*—to list only a few.

What a rich variety of events, types, life and customs! But all these works, each gifted in its own way, exemplify one or other of two particular lines. One stretches out to the ancient past, the other concentrates on military stories of the times of Suvorov or 1812.

Yet what a wealth of wonderful historical themes of keen interest still remains untapped. Such, for example, as Russia's struggles for freedom of all Slavs, Russians in the Mediterranean, Russian opposition to German intrigue in the nineteenth century, Russians in the East! Of the epoch of the war with Napoleon our writers have only been attracted so far by 1812, while the foreign campaigns of 1813-14 remain untouched. Such noble generals of those days as Dokhturov, Konovitsyn and Neverovsky, such guerrillas as Seslavin and Figner, such mariners as Ushakov and Senyavin, have been left in the shade.

The rear is the forge of victory, but on this theme very little has been written—only a few books and these mostly sketches. True, Marietta Shaginyan's *The Urals on the Defensive* and Anna Karavayeva's *Stalin Craftsmen* are books which deserve the greatest attention, as do also the sketches of Yelena Kononenko and of experienced and keen-eyed journalists such as Boris Agapov and Kolosov.

But actually only one big novel has been written about the

heroic work of the rear—Perventsev's *The Test.* Natan Rybak has written a novel about the rear, *Arms are With Us;* Azuyev a novel about Karaganda, *Hours' Trial;* Slanov a novel about Kazakhstan, *The Firebreathing Mountain;* Boldans a play called *Baikal Fishermen;* and Senchenko *Sails are Hoisted*—but practically none of these books is available in Russian, and this raises the question of translation.

Many of our poets are busy with translations. Among them Isakovsky, Adalis, Derzhavin, Aliger, Antokolsky, Zvygintsev, Brodsky-Lienkevich, Turganov, Penkovsky and Petrovykh. It might almost be said that there is scarcely a poet in our country who is not doing translations. Mikhail Lozinsky, who is a splendid translator, has just completed a major work. He has translated Dante's *Divina Commedia* in full. This is a poetic landmark that deserves to become widely known.

* * *

To this day we hear talk and discussion about so-called pure art and non-pure art. This is a deplorable misunderstanding. Mayakovsky's "Tass Windows" have found their place in the history of literature. Self-satisfied art is not art but trade.

Any work—major or minor—which appeals to a broad reading public, which helps it to a wider and deeper knowledge of the heroism of our struggle, of the feats and prowess of our citizens and of the power that motivates them, and which teaches them what lies before them at this juncture—this is a real contribution both to the front and to the rear. Upon the writer also lies the responsibility for the education of coming generations. Questions of ethics, the inculcation of ideals, of our great ideals of Socialism, the strengthening of the moral fibre of the people—such are the great aims towards which our great literatures are striving.

What sort of individual will emerge from the war? V. M. Molotov said: "Matters should not be restricted to the military defeat of the fascist forces. It is necessary to complete the moral and political defeat of fascism as well."

To this writers may contribute powerfully by their words of passion and truth. Comrade Stalin has emphasized that we, all

of us, workers, collective farmers, Soviet intellectuals, the whole Soviet people are determined to do yet more to finish the job.

Writers must concentrate all their creative energies on helping forward final victory and bringing about the speediest possible defeat of fascism and triumph of our just cause. It is our writers' duty to labour with the same energy as the entire Soviet people, as all Soviet intellectuals. Soviet writers must realise their responsibility to the people, the Party and the Government—they are statesmen working in a great epoch. The weapon of the writer—the pen—must be as victorious as the weapons of the Red Army.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Very many works of the writers referred to have been published in English. Among these are: PLAYS—Simonov's *The Russians*, Korneichuk's *The Front* and Leonov's *Invasion*, all in *Soviet War Plays* (Hutchinson). NOVELS—Ostrovsky's *The Making of a Hero* (Secker and Warburg), Ehrenburg's *Fall of Paris* (Hutchinson), Grossman's *The People Immortal* (Hutchinson), Wassilewska's *Rainbow* (Hutchinson), Perventsev's *The Test* (Hutchinson), Gorbatov's *Taras's Family* (Hutchinson). Forthcoming from Hutchinson are Alexei Tolstoy's *The Road to Calvary*, Sholokhov's *They Fought for their Country* and Borodin's *Dmitri Donskoi*. SHORT STORIES, SKETCHES and ARTICLES by Pavstovsky, Simonov, Sobolev, Grossman, Sholokhov, Wassilewska, Kozhevnikov, Vishnevsky, A. Tolstoy, Pavlenko, Fadeyev, Ehrenburg, Tikhonov himself and others are to be found in *Soviet Short Stories* 1942-3 and 1944 (Pilot Press), *Soviet War Stories* and *Russians Tell the Story* (Hutchinson), as well as smaller Hutchinson collections such as *Stalingrad, Orel, Leningrad, Sebastopol*, etc.; special selections from A. Tolstoy (*My Country*) and Ehrenburg (*Russia at War*) are issued by Hutchinson and Hamish Hamilton respectively; Hutchinson has also in preparation Sobolev's *Sailor's Soul*. VERSE anthologies, including pieces by many of the poets named, are in preparation by Herbert Marshall (for Pilot Press), for Hutchinson (by several hands), and by A. Moray-Williams and de Pinto (for Muller).—*I.M.* and *H.P.J.M.*

THE COSSACK

By KONSTANTIN SIMONOV

★

IT WAS late in the spring of 1922 when at last Sergei Vershkov came home on leave. Although he was only twenty, he already had behind him three years of active service on the Civil War fronts and a year at the Borisoglebsk Military School besides. Being young, he found life an endless source of delight. Four years before he had left his native village a mere stripling and now he was returning a grown man, and a full-fledged Cossack to boot, as the decoration on his tunic—awarded for valour at Kastornaya where he had accounted for eleven Whites—and the moustache, which, in spite of his youth, was almost as luxurious as Budyenny's, testified. The red chevrons on his sleeve would alone have sufficed to prove that he was now no longer plain Seryozha but Platoon Commander Comrade Vershkov.

It was early morning when he alighted from the train and walked through the familiar *stanitsa.*[1] He walked slowly as befitted a man of his years, although he wanted to throw dignity to the winds and race wildly down the street as he used to when a boy. It was as well he did not, for when he reached the corner, and the green roof of his home had already come into sight, he saw three aged villagers coming towards him. They were all very old, perhaps the oldest in the *stanitsa*, one of them had even fought in the Turkish campaign, which was ages ago. Vershkov had known them all from his childhood, and it seemed to him as though they could never change, as though they looked exactly as they had fifteen years before. But as the old men came closer he noticed that all three of them had St. George's Crosses pinned to their tunics. This was not the only unusual thing about their appearance. Vershkov noted that they all wore full parade dress,

[1] A Cossack village is so called.

something kept for rare occasions. As they came abreast of him they stood suddenly to attention and the eldest of the three said in a firm voice:

"Your Honour, permit us to congratulate you upon your return to your father's home."

Saluting smartly, the old man offered his hand to Vershkov and kissed him on both cheeks in Cossack fashion. This was a tremendous tribute and Vershkov knew that it meant recognition by the village elders of his maturity and was a sign that his fellow-villagers were proud of him. Swaggering slightly, he accompanied the elders down the street. Rolling a cigarette, he licked it and stuck it in a corner of his mouth. Not until they had reached his home and three steps away from him he saw his mother standing in the doorway in her old familiar wrap with her hands folded under her shawl, did he forget his new-found dignity. With one bound he was beside her and had clasped her to his broad bosom, that had yearned for her for so long.

* * *

Twenty years later, in the early spring of 1942, a mud-bespattered sedan car drove up the street of the *stanitsa* and stopped outside the familiar house. An adjutant leapt out of the car and opened the door for a middle-aged man of powerful build in the uniform of a colonel. The latter's hair was greying at the temples and his eyes, set in a swarthy weather-beaten face, looked even bluer than they were. Signing to his adjutant to wait in the car, the colonel limped up the steps. He pushed open the door without knocking and stood on the threshold for a second or two, gazing in silence upon the bent figure of a woman who was sitting with her back to him knitting. At last he spoke.

"Mother," he said softly.

The woman turned her head and uttered a cry of both surprise and joy. The next moment she was in his arms, her white head resting against his breast. For a long while he stood thus in his military cap and greatcoat, stroking her head, which trembled slightly with age. Then at last he drew her down onto a chair, threw off his coat with a weary gesture and sat down beside her.

He had been in Siberia when the war broke out, and from there he had gone straight to the front. This was his first homecoming in five years and with a pang he realised how his mother had aged in that time. The mother, too, studied her son and found him much changed. His head had been shaved in hospital and the hair now grew in a short, greying stubble. His face had aged, it had become sunken and had acquired a hard, obstinate look that had not been there before. They sat thus together for a while, examining each other's features in silence. Then the mother turned aside and wept. Vershkov knew that she was weeping for her younger son Misha, who would never come home again.

He did not attempt to console her. He knew that Misha had been her favourite son and that to comfort her would be useless. He himself had not yet got over the loss, and, whenever he thought of it, the image of Misha as he had last seen him arose vividly—lean, sun-burned, smiling, in a faded tunic and huge swamp boots with a thin switch in his hand.

"Don't worry, we'll fight our way through," he had said. "We'll make it, Comrade Colonel." And indeed, as he had stood there with that boyish grin, slapping his thigh with the switch, it had been hard to believe that anything amiss could happen to him.

Looking at his mother, Vershkov now remembered Kiev. His Division had been among the last to retreat from the city. It had been late September, a hot Ukrainian September. At moments during those dusty, stifling days, Death had hovered so near that it had seemed impossible to escape his icy clutches. Vershkov had crossed the river with the ultimate rearguard and his subordinate commanders, who had crossed previously at different times and by devious ways during the night, had come to him with their reports. Those had been the most terrible days of the war and not all had proved equal to the test. Some commanders had lost their equipment, others had reached the eastern bank of the river with practically no men. Vershkov, who had always been distinguished for his self-control, had lost his equanimity for a time and been harsh, even brutal with his officers.

"Where are your men?" he had asked one battalion commander, a shell-shocked captain whose face was affected by a nervous twitch.

"I fought to my last bullet," had stammered the major. "See in how many places my tunic has been pierced. I fought my way across."

"Yes, but what about your men, the men under your command?" Vershkov had persisted. "Where are they? Lost them?"

"I don't know," the major had replied in a low voice, shrinking before the icy flame that burned in Vershkov's blue eyes.

But Vershkov had controlled himself. He had thrust his hands behind him and clenched his fists.

"Court martial," he had muttered with averted head.

The next to report had been a battery commander.

"Where are your men?" Vershkov had demanded.

"All here with the exception of those killed," the lieutenant had replied calmly, confident that his answer would be satisfactory.

"And the guns? Where are the guns? Here or there?"

"There," had replied the lieutenant, less confidently. "We couldn't haul them across. We hadn't enough strength left. Just a minute, Comrade Colonel, permit me to explain," he had added, losing his composure in the face of Vershkov's stony stare.

Vershkov had turned away.

"You hadn't strength enough left to haul the guns across. And I haven't strength enough left to talk to you. Court Martial."

His men had never seen him in such a state. In the face of the Kiev tragedy his customary gentle, kind and understanding manner had deserted him. He had been incapable of forgiving anyone anything—not hesitancy, not confusion, not lack of foresight—but neither had he been able to forgive himself.

It was at that moment that his brother had arrived. Everyone in the Division had known very well that Battery Commander Lieutenant Vershkov was the Colonel's brother. But the attitude of the two men to one another had been so official and curt that no stranger would have suspected their relationship.

"Lieutenant Vershkov at your service, Comrade Colonel," a voice had said behind the Colonel's back, and the latter had

turned round to behold Misha's face, exhausted, grimy, but lit by the inevitable grin.

Vershkov had looked searchingly at his brother. The Lieutenant's appearance had been anything but prepossessing. He was bareheaded, his tunic was torn and soiled, his hands were a mess of bruises and scratches. For the first time in his life a feeling of terror had seized Vershkov. From his brother's appearance, he had concluded that Misha, like those others, must have swum alone across the river, heedless of the fate of his men and guns. And if that were so, he had felt, nothing on earth should save his brother. In those brief seconds of silence as he had stared at Misha, all that would inevitably follow within the next few minutes and hours had flashed through his mind. Now he, the Colonel, would ask his brother where his guns were and Misha would say "over there," and then he would hand Misha over for court martial, and Misha would be shot because a man deserves to be shot for that. And then he, Vershkov, would be an accursed creature for the rest of his life, he would never be able to see his mother again, for he would never be able to explain to her why he could not have acted otherwise, why he had had to order his younger brother to be shot, the Misha whom he had once carried on his shoulder, whom he had taught to ride, Misha, the spoiled darling of the whole family.

"Where are your men, Comrade Lieutenant?" he had said at last, controlling himself with an effort. And perhaps only Misha, who knew him so well, could have noticed the tremor in his voice.

"Here. Half a mile to the left," Misha had replied cheerfully.

"And your guns?"

"All here," had replied Misha, with a grin. And in that grin his brother had read the unspoken message: 'Don't worry, old chap. I wouldn't let you down.'

Vershkov had sighed heavily and said nothing for a few seconds, for he had been unable to speak. When his chief of staff had confirmed that the battery had been hauled across complete, Vershkov had said:

"Good. Come inside for a minute Comrade Lieutenant"

and, leading the way, he had passed through the low doorway of the fisherman's hut in which he had taken up his quarters.

Only then had his features relaxed and, without saying a word, he had hugged his brother so tightly that the other had barely been able to suppress a grunt. When Vershkov had released him and sat down with Misha opposite him, the younger man for the first time since the war broke out had winked and said in an informal tone:

"So you got the wind up, Comrade Colonel, eh?"

"A bit," Vershkov had admitted. "How could I ever have explained to mother . . ." He had broken off and offered Misha a cigarette.

"Here, light up."

After that had followed more marches, one after another, bloody and horrible, amid bomb explosions, dust and death. The last time he had ever seen Misha alive had been in a small copse from which they had had to fight their way through the German lines to their own side. He had assigned Misha to the most dangerous spot, to guard their rear and cover with his light guns their desperate bid for freedom. He had embraced the lad and kissed him three times with his cracked lips, as they used to kiss in their childhood at Easter time. It was then that Misha, slapping his topboot with the switch, had said with his boyish grin:

"Don't worry, Comrade Colonel. We'll get through. We'll make it . . ."

Vershkov had never seen him again. He himself had broken through with his main force to our own positions. He had been seriously wounded in the fighting and had been carried on a makeshift stretcher through the forest. When he regained consciousness, he had asked who had come through and who had perished, and had been told that his brother had been killed, standing his ground to the last breath.

Long after he had recovered he had kept the news from his mother. He had known that it had comforted her somewhat to know that the younger boy was serving under his older brother, hence he had felt responsible for Misha even to the extent of

being ready to pay the supreme sacrifice himself if only Misha could have been spared. But it had turned out the other way about, it was he who had survived while Misha had perished.

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When his mother's grief had spent itself and she had dried her eyes, she seemed her old self again. As she laid the table, Vershkov plied her with questions about the old Cossacks still left in the *stanitsa* and the neighbouring villages. With her customary tact his mother asked no questions, but gave him a detailed account of all their friends and acquaintances, recounting who had died, who was still living, who had moved, who of the old Cossacks were left, who had sons in the army. He listened attentively, putting in a question now and again and sometimes entering a name in a note book. The next morning his adjutant took the car and went around to twenty different addresses, paying his respects and inviting the old men to come that evening to visit the home of Colonel Sergei Ivanovich Vershkov.

The courtyard of the Vershkov cottage presented a lively scene that evening as horesmen rode up to the door one after another and alighted to be greeted by their host, who stood bareheaded on the doorstep to bid them welcome. After the exchange of greetings, Vershkov, as was the custom, invited his guests to the table, and the drinks were served. As she waited on the visitors, his mother kept glancing proudly at her son. The fact that all these venerable old men had come to him was to her a much more convincing proof of her son's importance than all his decorations and rank.

When the glasses had been refilled for the third time, Vershkov rose to emphasise the importance of what he was about to say. He told his hearers that he had come here to form a Cossack Division of volunteers, that he had been chosen for the job because he was a Cossack himself, that he would command the Division, and that, knowing the Cossack custom, he had called the elders together to solicit their help in the matter.

The old men listened in silence, pondering what he had said. Then the eldest of those present—a veteran soldier by the name

of Trofim Ilyich Yerokhin—rose and stroked his moustache which, in defiance of all the laws of nature, had simply refused to turn grey.

"We shall do our utmost," he said at length. "In the first place we'll join up ourselves, those of us who are fit enough. I, for one, will go. Only you must see to it that those doctors aren't allowed to butt in with their tubes and examining boards. That's the only condition we insist on. And, as for help, you know you can rely upon us."

Yerokhin sat down with an air of finality. The others were similarly sparing of words, on the one hand because everyone considered the matter settled and on the other because the table was still loaded with food and drink and those assembled were impatient to moisten their long whiskers in vodka once again, as was fitting on so worthy an occasion.

Vershkov, who could carry his liquor as his father and grandfather had carried it before him, drank steadily and watched his guests with interest. They were an amazing tribe, these Cossacks. They simply refused to grow old. It took not years, but decades, to add a few grey hairs to their dusky beards that seemed to whiten slowly hair by hair. The sight of these venerable old men reminded Vershkov of his childhood and youth. In spite of the fact that he had long grown accustomed to authority, he nevertheless felt strange to be sitting at the head of such an assembly.

He remembered how, in his youth, a young Cossack had not been considered grown-up until he had done his term of service in the army. There had been a certain grim justice in this old Cossack tradition. It had implied that, unless a man had gone through the rigorous training of a soldier, he had not attained manhood. And if a young Cossack took to drink before he had had a taste of soldiering, his elders had been entitled to have him flogged for trespassing upon the prerogatives of the adult before he had shown his mettle. Exceptions to this rule had been made only for Trinity Day and the Feast of the Holy Virgin, when riding and wrestling contests had been held. The winners of the contests had been acclaimed by the elders, who in the evening had invited each to their table and drunk with him no matter

how callow his youth. Vershkov himself had been thus honoured on one memorable occasion, and he now recalled with what trepidation he had then taken his seat at table among the elders. And although so many years had passed since that great day, he felt something of the same excitement stirring him even now. He was stirred by the sight of these old Cossacks, by the youthful fire in their eyes, by their broad shoulders, somewhat stooped by the years but still unbowed, by their gnarled powerful hands. All the proud indomitable strength of his people seemed to be embodied in these aged, ageless men. And he thought how fine it would be if his Division included a goodly number of such splendid old men. He promised himself to make sure that there would be no meddling doctors with their tubes to thwart them.

In the weeks that followed the word went around from *stanitsa* to *stanitsa* that a Colonel had come to form a Cossack Volunteer Division, and that he himself was a Cossack from these parts. Indeed many of the local folk knew him or had heard of him.

"Who did you say he was?"

"Seryozha Vershkov."

"Which Vershkov is that?"

"Why, Aksinya Ivanovna's lad, of course."

Those who did not remember Seryozha Vershkov himself, remembered his mother Aksinya Ivanovna, or his father Ivan Semyonovich Vershkov, who had been killed by the Whites in 1920. And the facts that the Colonel was one of themselves, and that he, Aksinya Ivanovna's lad, was to form the Division, were a source of satisfaction to the Cossacks and made many an old-timer eager to be back in the saddle again.

* * *

Vershkov's Division fought its first battles in the Kuban. The German troops had taken Rostov and were now advancing on Stavropol, Armavir and Krasnodar. It was a hot and dusty Kuban August. It was heartbreaking to look at the fields of waving corn only half reaped, the orchards whose trees groaned under the weight of their apples, and the endless fields of ripe

melons—to have to abandon all this just at harvest time was painful indeed.

The Division was assigned to the heaviest rearguard actions, holding the enemy at bay until the very last moment so as to enable the other units to withdraw. They fought as infantrymen from dawn till dusk, but at night they would mount their horses and give the Germans the slip only to engage them the next morning at some point where the enemy least expected to find them. They fought at Kushchevskaya, at Tikhoretskaya, at Malorossiskaya. And each night they would ride silently and sorrowfully through the familiar Cossack villages.

Besides Don Cossacks there were Cossacks from the Kuban in the Division and, now and again, as they passed through the villages, a Cossack would rein in his horse in front of some house and, leaning from the saddle, would silently embrace a weeping woman and then urge his horse on again. But not one of these men remained behind. In those days Vershkov was aware of a fierce hatred and bitterness in his men against the Germans, something that had been absent in the first year of the war. They still thought wistfully about their homes and families, but their yearning for home was eclipsed by their desire to fight. They now left their homes and families without a moment's hesitation, for they saw no other way out. The most important thing in their eyes was to keep a firm grip on their weapons, and a stout heart, and to carry on to the bitter end.

Their ranks, which had thinned out in the first battles, were now swollen by hundreds of volunteers who joined them as they passed through the Cossack villages. Fathers joined sons, and sons fathers. And no grey-headed Cossack was too proud to serve in a squadron commanded by son or nephew. Many requests were submitted by relatives asking to be allowed to serve together in the same squadron or platoon, and Vershkov made it a rule never to refuse.

Peter Mordvintsev, commander of the 3rd Squadron, was killed in action near K. When they found him at night on the battlefield, his father, Mikhail Semyonovich, who served as a machine gunner in the same squadron, stood for a long while

over the body of his son. When the men set to digging a grave he stopped them.

"Don't", he said, "I'll bury him myself." He lifted the body on to his powerful shoulders and, bending slightly under the burden, strode away.

Vershkov did not interfere, but nevertheless he ordered someone to keep an eye on the old man. Old Mordvintsev strode off to the edge of the village where an orchard stood on the slope of a hill, and there, under a gnarled old apple tree, he laid down the body of his son. Slowly and deliberately he rolled a cigarette smoked it to the end and threw the butt away, grinding it out carefully with his heel. Then he took his sapper's spade out of its cover and commenced to dig a grave. He worked with the slow deliberation that distinguished all his actions, and the grave he dug was deep and wide and neat, different indeed from the hastily dug ditches in which most soldiers are buried at the front. When he had buried his son, old Mordvintsev cut three notches crosswise on the trunk of the apple-tree, replaced his spade in its cover and, crossing himself three times, went back to his squadron. He did not shed a single tear, nor utter a word of complaint. He did not even talk about his son. But the following morning, when preparations for an attack on foot were under way and men were being appointed to lead the horses back into the woods, Vershkov, who happened to be passing through the lines of the 3rd Squadron, bumped into Mordvintsev. The old Cossack looked downcast.

"Comrade Colonel," he said. "I've been appointed to look after the horses again. Please tell them that it won't do. I can't do that duty any more."

"Why not?" Vershkov asked.

"The Germans killed my son yesterday. I can't look after horses any more. I've got to avenge the lad. Comrade Colonel, if they try to make a horse-herd of me again I'll chuck the horses and clear off."

There was such a fierce earnestness about his manner that Vershkov overlooked the breach of discipline implied in his words and granted his request.

Vershkov felt smoulder within himself the same savage ferocity

he observed now within his men. Sometimes, when he had occasion to admonish his commanders for taking unnecessary risks in action, he would feel that his words lacked conviction, that he did not really mean what he was saying. He knew that it was necessary to curb their zeal, but he did not want to. Because, having himself lost that feeling of self-pity and fear of death, he could readily understand its absence in others.

Between Kropotkin and Krasnodar the Division was nearly trapped. It was necessary to sacrifice at least half one regiment to save the other two. That was the worst day they were ever to experience. The German infantry was not so strong, but their seventy tanks swiftly broke through all barriers and swept back and forth over the regiment's positions for hours on end.

The regimental commander had been killed in the morning and Vershkov, who did not as a rule interfere in the activities of his subordinates, virtually took over command of the regiment himself although a new commander for it had been appointed. The Colonel did everything that could possibly be done under the circumstances. He talked to the runners and commanders, issued orders, and preserved that outward calm that had, perhaps, an even greater effect on the morale of his men than the orders he gave. So long as the telephone still functioned, he kept in touch with the men by phone, giving them words of encouragement and cheer. But when the wires had been cut, and the area that the regiment occupied, beginning with the outposts and ending with the command point, had been reduced to one vast ravaged field over which the German tanks moved at will, keeping up an earsplitting roar, Vershkov prepared to do the only thing remaining possible under the circumstances—to die fighting, a privilege usually denied to his rank. He buttoned his collar, thrust two grenades into his belt—the number assigned to all the others—and climbed out of the commander's dugout into a small trench on the open field. No one raised any objection because hopes of salvation were almost nil, and everyone understood the Divisional Commander's wish to die like a soldier, in battle.

By that curious type of chance that occurs daily at the front,

the German tanks passed right and left of the trenches they occupied and Vershkov did not perish. That night he succeeded in getting the regiment safely away and, by devious routes, they reached Maikop, catching up with the other units.

Late that autumn the Division was transferred to the sandy wastes around Mozdok. As far as the eye could see, there lay nothing but sand dunes, and there was almost no snow, which made it seem all the colder. The Division maintained strong defensive actions here and everyone felt that a change had set in. The Germans were obviously played out, unable to press on any more. They still attacked, their tanks still broke through here and there, but there was a difference: the tide had turned.

The Division celebrated the anniversary of the October Revolution on November 7 amid the sand dunes. The Red Army offensive had not yet begun but it was already in the air. There was a lull in hostilities, but the storm threatened to break at any moment.

Vershkov decided to celebrate the Twenty-Fifth Anniversary under the canopy of the stars at night. The tarpaulins were taken off the Dodge trucks and spread on the ground between two tall sand dunes and on that makeshift tablecloth were served all the provisions they had been accumulating for the occasion. Vershkov ordered trucks to be drawn up on either side and the headlights turned on. Four great yellow pools of light illumined both the festive board and the Cossacks squatting close together on the sand. Everyone who could be spared was present—regimental and squadron commanders and old bearded Cossack volunteers, elders of their units. Three or four miles to the north the usual rifle and artillery duels were in progress, and the sky was lit up at regular intervals by flares.

None of the men present had ever celebrated the occasion under such circumstances. Snowflakes fell into their vodka mugs and from time to time one of the guests would clap his frozen hands or jump up and stamp his benumbed feet to get the blood circulating again. The first toast was for the anniversary, for victory, after that they drank to their fallen comrades, and then, as is always the case in brief moments of relaxation at the front

the conversation turned to past campaigns and engagements, to the folks at home in the villages of the Don and Kuban, and it seemed that there would be no end to the talk because there was so much to recall.

Long after the men had returned to their units, Vershkov paced back and forth outside his dugout, his boots making a crunching sound on the freshly fallen snow. The headlights had been switched off. Watching orderlies roll up the tarpaulins, Vershkov mused on the vast number of camps that had been broken up since the war, the innumerable dugouts they had lived in and abandoned, the billets at which they had spent a night on their innumerable marches, and wondered how many more such temporary dwelling places would be their lot before the tale was done. Yet strangely enough the reflection caused him neither pain nor resentment. On the contrary, he felt somewhat comforted by the thought of such many changes, by the thought that amidst all these changes the Division had gone on unchanged, that the Division was a rock that stood firm amid the ocean of events, and that he, Vershkov, would be with it to the last. His Division had become part of him, it had become his own self, his heart and soul, something from which he could not be severed. And although he was proud and ambitious by nature, at that moment he did not wish for promotion, all he wanted was to remain in command of his Division until the very end.

* * *

I met Vershkov at the end of February, during the fighting between Rostov and Taganrog. What he had foreseen that cold November night had come to pass, and now his Division was advancing across the country over which it had once retreated, It had crossed the Don and was now fighting beyond the river on the borders of the Ukraine.

The Colonel had just returned from a visit to one of the regiments and was sitting at a table. He had removed his greatcoat, but as usual had forgotten to take off his Cossack cap. It was that hour when the orders for the day have already been issued and the first reports have not yet arrived, and for a brief space an

expectant pause prevails at staff headquarters. This is a moment that can be devoted to reflection, a moment when one can allow oneself to think of matters not pertaining to the day's work. Vershkov was pensive. Leaning back in his chair he was drumming absentmindedly with his fingers on the table.

"A penny for your thoughts?" I ventured.

He smiled. "It is hard to say exactly what I have been thinking about. Everything and nothing, I should say. I have been recalling a visit I made when we recaptured Kushchevka recently. One evening I took a walk down to the garden where old Mordvintsev had buried his son, the squadron commander. We had come back to Kushchevka without the old man. He was wounded at Tikhoretskaya and is in hospital now. So in his place I went down to the orchard and found the tree with the three notches and stood for a while at his son's grave. And, you know, it occurred to me at that moment that I am something of a father to them all, the dead as well as the living. And whenever I think of my Division it seems to me that although its ranks have thinned out it is still big, bigger than it was when we fought our first battle. It consists now of the living and the dead, of all those who have fought, as well as those who are still fighting, in its ranks. Its strength is the strength of the dead as well as of the living, its strength lies in their heroism. To be returning over the land in which our dead are buried, to be marching back over their graves, somehow fortifies our spirit and gives us the strength to stand firm. Don't you agree?"

Without waiting for an answer he fell into a brown study again. Then suddenly his features lit up in a smile.

"I had a letter from my mother the other day which, thanks to my own thoughtlessness, is causing me quite some embarrassment. One of the men from the Division had been to see her while on leave—I have not yet been able to discover who the rascal was—and he must have been telling tales about me. The result was a good scolding by post. 'Rumours have reached me,' she wrote 'that although you are a man of importance in the army you sometimes stick your nose into places where by all rights you most certainly should not be. I absolutely forbid you to do

anything of the kind. . . .' I was foolish enough to show the letter to the chief of staff and we had a good laugh over it. He must have told the regimental commanders about it because, whenever I go to some regiment or other with the intention of visiting one of the squadrons in the forward positions, the commander in question places all sorts of obstacles in the way. When I protest that he has no right to act like that he says: 'I have every right, Comrade Colonel, your mother has forbidden it.' And you know how strict we Cossacks are about parental discipline!"

Vershkov smiled again, and in his smile I could read his desire to be transported at that moment back to his native Cossack village, back to the spot where his mother, Aksyinya Ivanovna, must, at that very moment perhaps, be sitting at the familiar deal table, busy with her knitting.

THE SCOUT

By VADIM KOZHEVNIKOV

★

HIS FLYING clothes torn to tatters, and with holes in them burned through in places while he dozed of a night by a campfire, hung loosely on his emaciated body. His red, unkempt beard, and the deep lines on his face ingrained with dirt, made him look much older than he really was.

Captain Pyotr Zhavoronkov had baled out behind the enemy's lines in March on a special mission and now, what with the thaw setting in and rivulets and streams swelling up everywhere, it was no easy matter trying to make his way back through the woods in his sodden felt boots. At first he had travelled only by night. During daylight he had hidden away in various holes and corners. But now, afraid that hunger would completely undermine his strength, he was pushing on in the daytime too.

The Captain had carried out his mission. The only thing that remained to be done was to locate the wireless operator who had been dropped somewhere in the vicinity some two months ago.

'Carried out his mission!' How simple it sounded now. How much vital weight and physical energy he had lost on this job—he who had never had an ounce of superfluous weight.

During the last four days he had had next to nothing to eat. Pressing on through the sodden forest his famished eyes lingered longingly on the white trunks of the birch trees the bark of which —he knew—could be pounded to dust and cooked in the tin where he had carried his supply of T.N.T.—a bitterish sort of gruel, true, with a woody flavour.

When things went hard with him the Captain had a way of arguing with himself as though he had a worthy and staunch companion at his side.

'Now bearing in mind the exceptional circumstances,' the

Captain ruminated, 'you might make your way to the nearest road. In that case, you might stand a chance of getting a change of footwear. But, on the other hand, to contemplate making a raid on a solitary German transport is a sign that you're almost at the end of your tether. As the saying goes, the voice of the stomach is drowning the voice of reason.'

Accustomed to being alone for long periods at a stretch, the Captain could go on arguing with himself until he either grew weary or, as he invariably admitted, began to talk nonsense.

It seemed to him that this other, second fellow, with whom he argued, was not at all a bad sort of a chap, the kind of man you could talk to, a sympathetic companion whose heart was in the right place. Only on rare occasions did the Captain cut him short roughly: 'Hey, you, jabber on as much as you like but don't forget to keep your eyes skinned.' He would pull himself up in this way at the slightest rustle or when he caught sight of ski tracks in the melting snow.

* * *

The Captain's opinion that his double was a fellow after a man's own heart, a pal who understood things, differed somewhat from the opinions regarding himself entertained by his comrades. In his unit the Captain was regarded as being a far from congenial person. Laconic, reserved, he did not imbue others with a desire for friendly confidences. He never found a cordial cheering word for newcomers who were going out on a job for the first time: on the contrary, in a most subtle manner he would do his utmost to scare them with the dangers in store for them: then he would really wax eloquent.

Sometimes he would turn a man who was assigned to him out of the plane just before it took off.

"Coward," he would shout. "I don't need your sort!" And he would slam the plane door shut.

Returning after a successful assignment the Captain would do his utmost to evade the congratulations of the men, slipping away on the flimsiest of excuses:

"Sorry, fellows, I just must get a shave, I look like a hedgehog," and off he would go to his quarters.

He was never fond of talking about his work in the rear of the Germans and confined himself to reporting to his superior officer. Resting after a job he would loll about on his bed and turn up for dinner with a somnolent and grumpy expression on his face.

"Not a very interesting chap," was the general opinion, "Rather a bore."

At one time had circulated a rumour that had served to explain his behaviour. It was said that his family had been wiped out by the Germans at the very beginning of the war. Hearing the rumour, the Captain had one day turned up to dinner holding a letter in his hand. He had kept it in front of him all the time he was eating his soup.

"From my wife," he had remarked offhandedly.

The men had exchanged glances. Many of them had worn a look of chagrin—for they had wanted to believe that the Captain was so stand-offish because of some great sorrow. But this incident had dispelled the idea.

Then again, the Captain simply detested the violin. The sound of a violin reacted on him like the scraping of a knife on glass does on others.

* * *

The forest was bare and dripping. The soggy ground was full of holes, filled with dirty water—last year's snow turning into slush. It was a miserable job to tramp through such a bleak place alone, dead beat.

The Captain, however, had deliberately chosen this bleak route. Upon it there would be less probability of meeting Germans on the way. And the more dismal and dreary the place looked the more confidently did he press forward.

The only drawback was the hunger which was making itself so strongly felt. At times a mist rose before his eyes. He stopped and rubbed his eyes, and when that did not help he punched his face with his fist in order to send the blood to his head.

Making his way down a gully, the Captain turned towards a tiny waterfall which trickled over a cliff rimmed with ice and began to drink. The taste of the snow water produced a feeling

of nausea. But he went on drinking nevertheless in order to stop the gnawing at the pit of his stomach.

Evening came. Faint shadows lay on the thin, slushy snow. It grew cold. The puddles froze over and the ice crackled underfoot. The wet branches became coated with ice, when he pushed them aside with his hand they tinkled like glass. However much the Captain tried to make his way silently, every step he took was accompanied by a cracking and a snapping.

The moon came up. The forest was aglow. Innumerable icicles and icy puddles reflecting the light of the moon sparkled like Bengal lights.

The wireless operator must be somewhere in the vicinity. But how could he expect to find him at once, if the spot in question covered an area of about two square miles? The man had probably found himself a retreat hidden away as snugly as the lair of a wild beast.

The Captain could not very well go shouting through the woods: "Hey, comrade! Where are you?"

* * *

The Captain made his way through a grove flooded with moonlight. His felt boots frozen by the night frost became heavy and stiff, like clogs.

He was vexed at the wireless operator because it was so difficult to find the man. But he would have been angrier still had he found him without any difficulty.

Stumbling over the trunk of a tree buried under an old snowdrift the Captain went sprawling on the ground. And when, with difficulty, he got onto his knees, steadying himself with his hands in the snow, he heard the metallic click of a revolver being cocked behind his back.

"Halt!" came a whispered order. "Halt!"

The Captain behaved rather queerly. Without turning round he began to rub his injured knee. But when, in the same whisper, he was ordered in German to put his hands up the Captain turned round and said scoffingly:

"When a man's down already, what is the use of shouting

'Halt!'? You should have gone for me at once and shot me, wrapping that revolver of yours in your cap—then the shot would have been muffled and almost inaudible. And then again, when a German challenges anybody he usually shouts 'Halt', yelling it at the top of his voice so that any other German nearby should hear him and come to his aid in case of need. Here we are, teaching you and teaching you and all to no purpose. . . ." The Captain scrambled to his feet. He gave the password in a whisper that could barely be heard. When he was given the countersign he nodded his head and, adjusting the safety cap, slipped his revolver back into his pocket.

"You held your gun at the ready all the same!"

The Captain glared angrily at the wireless operator.

"You didn't expect me to depend on you keeping your head, did you? Look here," he demanded impatiently, "better show me your hide-out!"

"Follow me," the wireless operator said remaining kneeling in an unnatural posture, "I'll crawl along."

"There's no need to crawl, there's nobody about in these woods."

"My foot is frozen," the radio operator explained in a whisper. " It's extremely painful."

The Captain snorted and followed the figure that was now crawling along on all fours.

"What tomfool game have you been up to? Running around barefoot, eh?"

"The plane was rocking badly when I baled out. One of my felt boots got caught and slipped off when I was still in the air."

"You're a nice one." And then he added: "It'll be a fine job getting out of here with you."

The wireless operator sat down, supported on an arm thrust into the snow.

"Now look here, Comrade Captain," said the operator in a tone of resentment, "I don't intend to burden anybody. You can leave me some food and clear off. When my foot's better, I'll manage by myself."

"Oh, yes? . You can just see me rigging up a sanatorium for

you! You don't reckon the Germans will get your bearings by any chance?" Bending down suddenly the Captain asked in alarm: "Hey, I say, what's your name? Your face seems familiar."

"Mikhailova."

"Mikhailova!" the Captain muttered. It was impossible to make out which predominated in his voice—embarrassment or resentment. "Oh, very well. Never mind. We'll get you out of here somehow." Then he enquired politely: "Can I do anything to help you?"

The girl made no reply. She crawled on up to her elbows in the snow.

* * *

The Captain's feeling of exasperation gave way to something else, something less defined but more disturbing. He remembered this girl Mikhailova at his instructional base camp, where she had gone through a course of training. From the moment he had clapped eyes on her she had roused irritation in him. He had simply been unable to make out why she was at the base camp—tall, beautiful, yes, very beautiful, with a proud tilt to her head and rich, finely moulded lips which seemed to hypnotize one when she spoke.

She had an unpleasant way of looking a person straight in the eyes, unpleasant not because her eyes were repugnant; on the contrary, she had large, intelligent and steady eyes with a glint of gold around large pupils. Yes, she had splendid eyes. What he did not like about them was that they looked at one so intently that the Captain could not stand it. And the girl had noticed this.

And then again that manner of hers of doing her hair, fluffy, sparkling and golden, reaching right to the collar of her great-coat!

How many times had the Captain told her:

"Tuck those pigtails of yours out of sight. A military uniform is not for a fancy-dress ball."

Mikhailova, it is true, had been very persevering at instruction: remaining behind after classes she had often asked the Captain questions which revealed a good grasp of the subject. Convinced, however, that the knowledge would be of no use to her, he had

replied briefly, tersely, looking impatiently at his watch all the time.

The superintendent of the courses had admonished the Captain for giving such little attention to Mikhailova:

"She's a good girl."

"She'd be all right at home, in the bosom of a family," and the Captain had suddenly burst out passionately, heatedly: "Please understand, Comrade Superintendent, people in our particular line can't afford to have family ties. Circumstances may dictate our having to do away with ourselves, with our own hands. And she? Would she be able to do that? She'd be weak with self-pity. What's the use of people like that? . . ."

To get rid of Mikhailova he had transferred her to the wireless operators' group.

The base camp where the scouts had undergone training had been located in a former Moscow rest home. The wide, closed-in verandahs, the red-carpeted floors, the exquisite furniture—the whole atmosphere in general so reminiscent of the days of peace, had inclined the pupils and instructors to take things easy of an evening. Somebody would sit down at the piano and then they would have dances. And had it not been for the fact that everybody present had been wearing military uniform, one might almost have believed that it was a peace-time week-end gathering in one of the many rest homes outside Moscow.

True, the anti-aircraft guns had barked, the white beams of the searchlights had scoured the skies—but one had not needed to think of that.

Classes over, Mikhailova had often found herself a comfortable corner on a settee in the drawing-room and plunged deep in a book. She used to read by the light of a lamp with an enormous shade attached to a big, massive, mahogany stand. This girl with the beautiful, tranquil face, restful pose, hair loose down her back, and fingers so slender and white, somehow had seemed to accord so ill with the technique of a sapper, the wielding of a knife the haft of which was made of rubber so as to give a better grip.

When Mikhailova used to catch sight of the Captain she would

always jump up and draw herself to attention as the regulations required to be done when an officer appeared.

Captain Zhavoronkov would walk past giving her a careless nod. Again that feeling of exasperation would rise up in him.

This strong man with the tanned, gaunt outdoor face and the somewhat tired and sad expression, was hard and exacting even to himself.

* * *

. . . German sappers had mined the country lanes which fed the trunk road. The night he was dropped, the Captain had shot the man on point duty with a small-calibre pistol which fired almost soundlessly and, armed with the man's lantern, had then taken his place on the road.

He had regulated the traffic, giving the required signals—green or red. When a tank column had appeared, he had switched on the red light barring its way along the main road and given the green light directing it to one of the mined country lanes.

. . . Stumbling across a telephone line connected with German staff headquarters, he had cut the wire and lain in wait. A signal corps man had shown up. He had been accompanied by several automatic-rifle men. Having repaired the line the signal corps man had gone off. The Captain had ripped the insulating tape from the wire and placed it on the ground. His ruse had worked just as he had planned. Discovering that the line was still not working properly the signal corps man had returned, but alone this time. The Captain had stabbed him. Then, coiling up the line, he had thrown it onto a hayrick and set the rick on fire.

Later he had crawled onto the roof of a German dug-out and dropped explosives down the chimney. He had shot down with his automatic rifle the Germans who had come tumbling out from under cover.

The Captain preferred to do a lone job. He had every right to. His heart had been chilled with an icy pain ever since the death of his wife and child. They had been mangled to death on the very first day of the war under the treads of a column of tanks that had swept through the frontier settlement where they lived.

The Captain did not care to show his grief. He did not want people to imagine that this sorrow of his was the cause of his daring. That was why he had tried to deceive his comrades. He had said to himself: "My wife and my child have not been killed, they're alive. I'm not petty. I'm like everybody else. I must fight cold-bloodedly." No, he was not petty. He concentrated all his efforts on the exacting of vengeance. During this war one meets many such men, men with wounded hearts, proud, melancholy and strong.

Good people, once happy and kind! What must you have suffered for your hearts to have been hardened so! And now, walking behind the wireless operator, who was crawling ahead, the Captain tried to dismiss every thought that might hinder him from drawing up a plan of action. He was hungry, weak, exhausted by his long journey, she was in pain from a frozen foot. She, of course, was reckoning on his help. But, then, she did not know that he wasn't fit for anything.

Tell her how things were? No, nothing doing! Better make her buck up somehow and in the meantime he'd husband his strength and then, maybe, he'd be able to manage somehow. . . .

* * *

On the steep slope of a hill the turbulent spring waters had excavated something in the nature of a cave. The powerful intertwining tree roots hung overhead, some thin like cord, others twisted and wiry, resembling nothing so much as a bundle of rusty hawsers. A roof of ice hid the cave from sight. In the daytime the light penetrated through this into the cave as though through the enclosing glass of a veranda. Inside, the cave was clean and dry, the floor was covered with a layer of pine branches. The only fittings were the square box containing the wireless apparatus, a sleeping bag, and a pair of skis leaning against the wall.

"Quite a snug place," the Captain remarked. And, touching the branches on the floor, he said: "Here, sit down and take your things off."

"What!" the girl exclaimed indignantly, in surprise.

"Take your things off. I've got to know what you're good for with that game leg of yours."

"You're not a doctor. And besides . . ."

"Look here," the Captain said, "we'd better come to an understanding from the very start—less back talk."

"Oh, that hurts!"

"Stop squealing," the Captain said, running his hand over her foot, which was all black and blue and swollen.

"That'll do, it's unbearable."

"Well, you've got to stick it," the Captain said. He took off the woollen scarf he had around his neck.

"I don't want your scarf."

"You prefer that stinking stocking of yours?"

"It doesn't stink, it's clean."

"Look here," the Captain repeated, "don't talk rubbish to me. Have you a bit of string?"

"No."

The Captain raised his hand, tore off a length of thin root and bound the foot-wrapping that he had already made out of his scarf.

"Now it'll hold," he declared.

After that he took the skis outside and got busy with his rubber-hafted knife. He came back, picked up the wireless apparatus and said:

"Come on, let's be going."

"You want to lug me along on those skis?"

"I don't want to, as a matter of fact. It's a case of having to."

"Just as you like—I have no choice."

"Now, that's the right spirit," the Captain agreed. "By the way, you haven't anything to eat, have you?" he asked.

"Here," she said, taking a bit of broken biscuit out of her pocket.

"Doesn't look much."

"It's all I have left. It's all I've had for several days. . . ."

"Everything's clear," the Captain said. "Others usually eat their biscuits first and leave the chocolate for a rainy day."

"You can keep your chocolate to yourself."

"I don't in the least intend to treat you," and the Captain left the cave, bending double under the weight of the heavy radio apparatus.

After plodding for an hour the Captain realised that he was on his last legs. And although the girl lying on the skis, or rather on the sled made out of the skis, helped him as best as she could by thrusting the thing along with her arms, he felt his strength giving out. His legs were shaky and his heart was pounding so that it seemed liable at any moment to stick in his throat.

"If I tell her I'm absolutely done in, she'll get panicky. But if I go on braving it out things will end pretty rottenly," he thought to himself.

The Captain looked at his watch.

"It wouldn't be a bad thing," he said, "to drink something hot."

"Have you any vodka?"

"Vodka!" the Captain exclaimed. "Don't you worry, but all the same I won't give you any vodka."

Digging a hole in the snow he made a flueway with a stick and covered the aperture with some green branches and snow. The branches and the snow would serve as a filter for the smoke and make it less noticeable. Gathering some dry twigs, the Captain put them into the hole and then, taking from his pocket a small silk bag in which he kept some powder, he sprinkled a handful onto the twigs and put a match to it.

The flames began to rise, licking the branches. He placed his T.N.T. tin on the fire and filled it up with bits of ice. After that he took the broken biscuit, wrapped it up in his handkerchief and, putting it on the stump of a tree, pounded it into a powder with the handle of his knife. This he put into the boiling water and began to stir. Taking the tin off the fire presently, he set it down on the snow to cool off.

"Is it nice?" the girl asked.

"Almost like coffee," the Captain replied, handing her the tin with the brown concoction.

"No, thanks, I can go without," the girl said.

"You'll have to go without a lot before I've finished with you,"

the Captain said. "But, in the meantime, stop playing the fool. Here, drink this."

Towards evening he managed to kill an old rook with a stick.

"Are you really going to eat that crow?" she asked.

"It's not a carrion crow, it's a rook," the Captain replied.

He grilled the bird over the campfire.

"Do you want any?"—he offered her half.

"Not for anything!" she replied, turning away in disgust.

The Captain hesitated for a moment and then said thoughtfully:

"Yes, it will be only fair"—and he ate the whole bird himself.

Lighting a cigarette he felt more cheerful and asked:

"How's your foot?"

"I think I could manage to walk a bit," the girl replied:

"Forget about it!"

All night long the Captain dragged the sled while the girl dozed fitfully.

Towards daybreak he stopped in a gully.

An enormous pine—torn up by the roots during a storm—lay on the ground. Under the mighty roots was a hollow. The Captain cleared away the snow, strewed the bottom with some branches and spread a ground sheet over them.

"You want to sleep?" the girl asked, waking up.

"For an hour, not more," the Captain said. "I've almost forgotten how to sleep by now."

The girl began to scramble out of her sleeping bag.

"Hey, what are you up to?" the Captain asked, raising himself on his elbow.

The girl went up to him and said:

"I'm going to turn in with you. It'll be warmer that way. We'll cover ourselves with the bag."

"Well, I'm . . ." the Captain began.

"Move over," the girl said. "After all you don't want me to lie in the snow, do you? . . . Are you uncomfortable?"

"Take your hair away, it's tickling my nose. I feel like sneezing, and in general . . ."

"I thought you wanted to sleep! Well, go to sleep. My hair won't interfere with you."

"But it does," the Captain mumbled drowsily and fell sound asleep.

The only noise was the dripping of the melting snow. Scurrying clouds, like wisps of smoke, threw fleeting shadows on the snow.

The Captain slept, his fist to his lips, a tired and even exhausted look on his face. The girl bent over him and cautiously slipped her arm under his head.

Heavy drops of water dripped from the canopy of branches over the hollow. The girl took her arm away and shielded the face of the sleeping man with her palm. When it became filled with water she just as carefully poured it aside.

The Captain opened his eyes, sat up and began to rub his face with the palms of his hands.

"Your hair's grey at the temples," the girl remarked. "Is it the result of that business?"

"Which business?" the Captain asked, stretching himself.

"The time when you were sentenced to be shot."

"I don't remember," the Captain said with a yawn. He did not feel inclined to recall the incident.

It had happened as follows. The previous August the Captain had blown up a large German ammunition dump. He had suffered from shellshock as a result of the air blast and been scorched by the flames. When the German ambulance men had picked him up he was lying on the ground in clothes so charred and smouldering as to be unidentifiable. Together with the German soldiers who had been injured he had been sent to a hospital. Here he had been laid up for three weeks. Before being sent to the rear the hospital inmates had been interrogated by a special commission. The Captain, together with a group of Germans who were feigning sickness, had been sentenced to be shot. They had been reprieved at the very last minute. Instead, they had all been bundled on to a transport plane and sent to somewhere in the vicinity of Yelna. Here they had been forced to launch a "psychological" attack against the Russians, a company of automatic-rifle men behind them to spur them on. The Captain had been wounded by a Red Army bullet. He had been picked up and the next two weeks he had spent in a Russian hospital.

In order to change the subject the Captain asked somewhat roughly but insistently:

"Does your foot still hurt?"

"I've told you already that I can walk," she replied irritably.

"Good. Now get on the sled. When the time comes you can do your walking."

The Captain harnessed himself to the makeshift sled and again he plodded on through the slush.

It was raining and snowing at the same time. The ground was slippery. Every now and then he would step into a hole filled with melting snow. It was a grey and dreary day. And just as drearily the Captain wondered whether they would manage to cross the ice of the river, which was most probably already covered with a layer of water.

A dead horse lay across their path.

The Captain squatted down over it and took out his knife with the rubber haft.

"You know", the girl, said getting up from the sled, "you do everything so efficiently that it's a pleasure to watch you."

"You're simply hungry, that's all," the Captain replied laconically.

He roasted several thin slices of meat using the wireless antenna in place of a spit.

"It's tasty!" the girl said in surprise.

"Of course," the Captain replied, "roasted horsemeat is much better than beef."

After his meal he got up and said:

"I'll go along and reconnoitre the ground. You stay here."

"Very well," she agreed. "You may think me silly but I'm beginning to find it very hard to be left alone now. I've somehow become accustomed to our being together."

"Now look here! None of that nonsense!" the Captain replied.

But this injunction applied more to himself because he felt confused.

He came back after dark.

The girl was sitting on the sled, her revolver in her lap. When she caught sight of him she smiled and got up.

"Sit down, sit down," the Captain said in the tone he had been accustomed to use in class. He rolled himself a cigarette and, looking at the girl as though sizing her up, he said:

"I've spotted something worth while. The Germans have rigged up an aerodrome not far from here."

"So what?" the girl asked.

"Oh, nothing," the Captain replied. "They've done it very neatly." Then he asked her seriously: "Is your apparatus in working order?"

"You want to contact the base?" the girl asked, brightening up.

"Yes," the Captain said.

Mikhailova took off her cap and adjusted the headphones. Several minutes later she asked the Captain what he would like to transmit. The Captain sat down beside her. Bringing his fist down on the palm of his hand he said:

"In short it's like this: my map's spoilt from being in the water. I can't indicate the exact location of the aerodrome. I shall have to give the co-ordinates according to my compass bearing. Owing to the low ceiling all ground bearings will be covered from sight. Our radio on wave length . . . give your wave length . . . will serve as their guide to the spot."

The girl took off her headphones. Her face beamed happily as she turned towards the Captain.

The Captain, however, rolling a new cigarette, did not even glance at her.

"Now look here," he said dully. "I'm going to take that wireless apparatus of yours and go over there," he indicated the direction with his hand, "in order to be nearer to the target. You'll have to make your own way back as best as you can. As soon as it gets dark slip down to the river. The ice is very thin so take a pole or something suitable with you. If the ice gives under you the pole will come in handy. Once you're across make for Malinovka It's about two miles away. Somebody'll meet you there."

"That's all very well," Mikhailova said, "only I'm afraid I can't give you the apparatus."

"Here, none of that," the Captain said.

"I'm responsible for the apparatus and I'm going to stick to it."

"As a sort of private gadget of your own, eh?" the Captain blurted out. Flaring up, he said loudly: "I order you."

"You know, Captain, that every one of your orders will be carried out. But you know equally well that you have no right to take the apparatus away from me."

"But do try to understand," the Captain said in a furious temper.

"I do understand," Mikhailova replied calmly. "What you propose to do is my job." And looking the Captain angrily in the eyes she said: "Here you go boiling over and want to tackle a job that's actually none of your business."

The Captain turned away abruptly. He wanted to say something, something extremely offensive, something that would make her smart, but checking himself he said with an effort:

"All right, go ahead, you do it." And as though to get his own back he added: "You couldn't of course think of it yourself, but now . . ."

Mikhailova looked at him scoffingly.

"I thank you very much for the idea," she said.

The Captain looked at his watch.

"What are you sitting here for? Time's short."

Mikhailova picked up the apparatus by the shoulder straps, took several paces and then glanced round towards the Captain.

"Good-bye, Captain," she said.

"Go on, go on," he blurted out and turned away in the direction of the river.

* * *

A slight mist covered the ground, the air reeked of dampness and everywhere could be heard the murmuring of running water which did not freeze even at night. The idea of dying in such weather was particularly unpleasant. As a matter of fact the idea of dying in any weather was not very pleasant.

Had Mikhailova, say, some three months ago, read a novel in which the heroine had gone through the adventures that had fallen to her lot, a dreamy look would have undoubtedly come into her beautiful eyes; drawing herself up cosily under her soft quilts she would have pictured herself in the place of the heroine;

only at the end, in revenge for all that she had suffered, would she have saved the life of the haughty hero. And then he would have fallen in love with her but she would not have paid the slightest attention to him.

The evening when she had told her father what she had decided on, she had not known that the work would demand such super-human efforts, that she would have to learn to sleep in the mud, go hungry, freeze in the open, be lonely and miserable. But had anybody told her frankly what was in store for her, how hard it would be, she would have remarked simply:

"Other people do it."

"Suppose you're killed?"

"Not everybody's killed."

"And if they torture you?"

She would have pondered that for a while and then said as though to herself:

"I don't know. I can't say how I'd behave. What I do know is that I wouldn't give anything away. And you know that too."

When her father had heard that her mind was made up, his head had dropped onto his chest and he had said in a hoarse voice that she could hardly recognize:

"It'll be hard, very hard now for your mother and me."

"Father!" she had said appealingly, "Father, but do try and understand. I simply can't stay at home."

Her father had lifted his face and she had been aghast—how old and weary he had looked.

"I do understand," her father had said. "Well, it would have been worse had my daughter been different."

"Father!" she had exclaimed, "Father, you're so good to me that I'm almost ready to cry."

She had told her mother the next morning that she was joining some military courses as a telephone operator.

Her mother had turned pale but, trying not to show her emotion, she had said:

"Only take care of yourself, darling."

During the training course Mikhailova had studied diligently, and during the examinations had been as excited as when she

had taken her examinations at school. How happy she had been when she learned that she had passed "excellent". The Captain, however, had been right. Alone in the woods during those terrible, cold, black nights, she had first given way to tears and then consoled herself by eating up all the chocolate. She had, transmitted the prescribed signals at regular intervals, and although at times she had terribly wanted to add something, something of her own so as to dispel that feeling of loneliness, she had refrained from doing so, so as not to use up the battery.

And now, making her way to the aerodrome, she was surprised how simple it had all been. Here she was, crawling through the slush, wet to the skin, her foot frozen. When, in the old days, she had been laid up with 'flu, her father had sat at her bedside and read aloud to her so that she should not strain her eyes. And her mother, with a look of concern on her face, had warmed the thermometer in her hands because her daughter had not liked to measure her temperature with a cold thermometer. And when anybody had rung up, her mother used to whisper in distress: "Yes, she's not well." And her father used to muffle the telephone so that when it rang the bell would not disturb his daughter. And now, if the Germans were quick in detecting the bearings of her radio, she would be killed for sure.

Yes, they would kill her, she who was so nice, so beautiful and good and, perhaps, gifted. And they would leave her lying in that hateful, wet snow. And she was wearing fur-lined flying clothes. The Germans, most likely, would strip her. And she shuddered, picturing herself lying naked in the mud. And the soldiers, with abominable looks in their eyes, would stare at her, at her naked body.

This forest so resembled that grove at Kratovo where she had spent one summer. There had been the same kind of trees there. And when she had been in the Pioneers' Camp there had been the same kind of trees there too. And there had been a hammock there, tied to two twin trees just like those over there.

And when, that time, Dimka had carved her name on the bark of a birch tree—just like that one over there—she had been angry because he had injured the tree and she had refused to speak to

him. And he had followed her and looked at her with sad and, therefore, beautiful eyes. And later on, when they had made it up, he had told her that he wanted to kiss her. She had closed her eyes and said pathetically: "Only not on the lips." And he had been so embarrassed that he had kissed her on the chin.

She was very fond of beautiful clothes. On one occasion when she was sent to make a report somewhere she had put on her best dress. Her friends had asked: "Why the glad rags?"

Looking at herself in the mirror she had thought to herself: 'I'm happy. It's so nice to be beautiful.'

And now she was crawling over the ground, dirty, wet, her eyes taking in everything, her ears intent, dragging her frozen, swollen foot after her.

'So they'll kill me. So what? After all, Dimka was killed and others too—such splendid people, all of them. Well, and I'll be killed. Am I any better than they?'

It was snowing. The puddles squelched under her. Old snow lay in patches in the hollows. She crawled on and on. Stopping to rest she would lie flat on the wet ground, her head on the hollow of her arm. She lacked the strength to crawl to a dry spot each time.

Then again she would crawl on, with the doggedness of a wounded man who crawls to a first-aid station where his wound will be dressed, where he will get a drink of water, where he will find blissful rest and other people will look after him.

The mist grew black because the night, too, was black. And somewhere, above the clouds, enormous planes were winging on their way. The navigator of the flight leader, sitting in his chair, his eyes half-closed, listened intently for the slightest sound coming from the earphones—but he could not catch the signals of the wireless operator.

The pilots sitting in the cockpits, the wireless operators and gunners in their places, also listened intently to the wheezing and screeching of the earphones—but no signal was forthcoming. The propellors cleaved a way through the murky sky. The planes flew ever forward but still there was no signal.

And suddenly, hardly audible, came the first cautious signal.

The enormous planes turned, steering their course by this flimsy thread of sound; ominous and heavy they ploughed through the cloud banks. The sound so dear, like the song of a cricket, like the rustling of the wheat or the dry autumn leaves in the breeze, served to guide the enormous steel planes.

The commander of the flight, the pilots, the wireless operators and gunners, the flight mechanics—and Mikhailova too—knew; the bombs would go hurtling down to the spot where the wireless transmitting the signal—the precious, cherished signal, the call to arms—was situated, because that was where the enemy aerodrome was too.

Mikhailova, on her knees in a pit filled with black, slimy water, bent over her apparatus, her hand working the key transmitting the signal. The sombre sky hung low over her head. It was empty and silent.

Her frozen foot became numb, her back ached and her temples too, as though somebody was squeezing her head with hot iron bands. She was feverish. When she put her hand to her lips it was hot and dry. 'I've evidently caught a cold,' she thought to herself moodily. 'What does it matter now, anyway.'

At times she felt that she was losing consciousness. She opened her eyes and listened fearfully. In the headphones she could hear the signal loudly and distinctly. Her hand, evidently, was automatically pressing the key transmitting the signal. 'That's the result of training! It's a good thing I went, and not the Captain. Could his hand have worked the signal automatically? But if I hadn't gone, I would have been in Malinovka by now and, maybe, somebody would have lent me a warm jacket . . . and there's a fire in the stove there . . . and everything would have been different. And soon nothing more will ever happen. . . . How strange things are. Here am I lying on the ground and thinking. But, somewhere, there's Moscow. And there are people there, lots of people. And nobody knows I'm here. After all, I'm splendid! I wonder whether I'm brave? I don't seem to be a bit afraid. It's probably because I'm so sick—that's why I'm not afraid. . . . If only it would soon be all over. Really, what are they up to? Can't they realise that I simply can't stick it any longer?"

Dashing away a tear she lay down on her side on the slope of the pit and went on transmitting the signal. Now she could see the vast expanse of sombre sky. Suddenly, searchlights began to play on it and she could hear the distant heavy throbbing of the engines. And Mikhailova, swallowing her tears, whispered to herself:

'Oh, you dears, you darlings. At last you've come for me. I'm feeling so bad here.' Suddenly she grew scared. 'What if that's what I've been transmitting instead of the signal? What will they think of me then.'

She sat up and began to transmit the signal distinctly, clearly repeating aloud to herself the code so as not to get muddled up. The roar of the planes' engines could be heard coming nearer and nearer.

Anti-aircraft guns opened fire.

'Aha, they don't like that!'

She stood up. She felt no pain, nothing. She pressed the key with all her strength, as though it were not a signal she was transmitting but a command—'Wipe them out, wipe them out!'

Cleaving the inky darkness the first bomb came hurtling down with a crash. The air blast threw Mikhailova on her back. Golden splashes of flame were reflected in the puddles. The ground trembled from the dull thuds. The wireless apparatus toppled down into the water. Mikhailova made an attempt to lift it up. Screaming bombs seemed to be making direct towards her, towards her pit.

She hunched up her shoulders and squatted down, closing her eyes tight. The glare from the flames penetrated through her eyelids. The blast of air following one explosion sent a pole with barbed wire around it flying into her pit. Between the bursting of the bombs she could hear the muffled sounds of things exploding and crashing at the aerodrome. The black mist reeked of petrol.

And then came silence; the anti-aircraft guns ceased their fire.

'It's all over,' she thought sadly to herself. 'Now I'm alone again.'

She tried to stand up, but her feet . . . she could not feel them

at all. What had happened? Then she grasped what was the matter. It happened sometimes that way. Temporary paralysis, the result of shell-shock—that's all. She lay down with her face in the wet clay to rest a little. If only one bomb had come her way! How simple everything would have been. And then she would have been saved from the worst.

'No,' she said suddenly to herself. 'Others have been through worse and yet they've managed to come out of it. Nothing's going to happen to me. I don't want it to.'

Somewhere not far off she could hear the chugging of a motor-car, and cold white beams of light flitted several times over the black shrubs; then came an explosion, something much weaker than that caused by a bomb, and then—quite near—several shots.

'They're looking for me. And how good it is just to lie like this. Won't I ever do this again?'

She made an attempt to turn over on her back but the pain in her foot was so intense that it seemed to lacerate her heart. She screamed, tried to scramble up and fell.

Cold, firm fingers unbuttoned her collar.

She opened her eyes.

"Is that you? You've come for me?" Mikhailova said, and burst into tears.

The Captain brushed away her tears with his hand and she closed her eyes again. She could not walk. The Captain gripped her by the belt and pulled her out of the pit. His other hand hung limply at his side.

She could hear the runners of the sled scraping over the slush.

Then she saw the Captain. He was sitting on a tree stump holding one end of a strap between his teeth and binding his bare arm; blood trickled down from under the strap. Looking at Mikhailova, the Captain asked:

"Well, how are you?"

"Pretty bad," she whispered.

"Oh, well," the Captain said between his teeth, "I'm about all in. Try and make the distance yourself, it's not far from here."

"And how about you?"

"I'll stay here and have a bit of a rest."

The Captain tried to get up but with a queer sort of smile he slipped off the stump onto the ground. He was very heavy and it took Mikhailova a long time to drag his limp body onto the sled. He lay uncomfortably, face down, but to turn him on to his back was beyond her strength.

For a long time she tugged at the traces to make the sled move. Every step caused her unbearable pain. But she kept on tugging and walking backwards, dragging the sled over the slushy, soggy ground.

Everything seemed blurred. How long could she last. Why was she standing and not lying exhausted on the ground. Leaning against a tree she stood there, her eyes closed, afraid that her knees might give way, because then, she knew, she would never have the strength to rise again.

She saw the Captain crawl off onto the ground; only his chest and head lay on the sled, he held on to the crossbar with his sound hand.

"It'll be much easier for you that way," he whispered.

He crawled along on his knees, half suspended over the sled. Sometimes he lost his grip and his face would strike the ground. When that happened she slid the sled under his chest, powerless to turn away so as not to look at his bruised and battered face.

Then she fell down and again she could hear the swish of the mud under the runners. Then she heard ice crackling. She felt as if she were suffocating, drowning; water closed over her. It seemed to her that all this was a dream.

She opened her eyes because she felt somebody's eyes fixed intently on her. The Captain was sitting on a bunk, emaciated, yellow, his beard unkempt, his hand in a sling between two dirty boards which served as splints. He was looking at her.

"You're awake," he said in a voice she didn't recognise.

"I wasn't sleeping."

"It makes no difference," he said. "It's just about the same."

She raised her arm and noticed that her arm was bare.

"Did I undress myself?" she asked plaintively.

"I undressed you," the Captain said, and examining the fingers

of his wounded arm he explained: "You and I had a bit of a dip in the river, and then I thought you were wounded."

"It makes no difference," she whispered and looked straight at him.

"That's true," he agreed.

She smiled and said:

"I knew you'd come back for me."

"How did you know?" the Captain asked with a smile.

"I simply knew."

"Nonsense," the Captain said, "you couldn't have known it in the least. During the bombing you acted as an orientating point and, well, you might have been popped off, so I looked around and found a hayrick so as to be able to continue giving the signal by fire. And then, again, an armoured car fitted up with wireless detected your transmitter. It combed the whole place until I got it with a hand grenade. And thirdly . . ."

"Thirdly what?" Mikhailova asked merrily.

"And thirdly," the Captain went on in a serious tone of voice, "you're a good kid." And then he added sternly: "But, speaking in general, have you ever heard of anybody acting otherwise in that particular situation?"

Mikhailova sat up and, holding a pile of clothes to her chest, she looked at the Captain with sparkling eyes and said loudly and distinctly:

"You know, I'm awfully fond of you."

The Captain turned away. His ears went red.

"Now, none of that."

"No, not that way. . . . I'm just simply fond of you." Mikhailova said proudly.

The Captain glanced at her, a frown on his face, and said thoughtfully:

"If that's what you mean, then, of course, that's different."

* * *

When the Captain returned to his unit from hospital his comrades did not recognise him. He was so jolly, so merry, so talkative. He laughed heartily, joked, and had a cheery word for

everybody. But all the time his eyes kept searching for somebody. His comrades, noticing it, guessed whom he was looking for and they told him casually:

"By the way, you know Mikhailova is out again on another job."

Bitter lines appeared on the Captain's face for an instant and disappeared. Without looking at anybody he said aloud so that everybody could hear:

"She's a good kid, there's no doubt about that," and, adjusting his tunic, he went off to report to his superior officer that he was back for duty.

AFTER DEATH

By BORIS GORBATOV

★

LIEUTENANT VOGANOV'S life may be told in four words: Childhood, School, Military School. But about his death volumes deserve to be written and epics composed. It sometimes happens that in the longest life there are altogether only three hours which are worth an entire lifetime. With Voganov these were his last three hours.

In those hours it was given to him to rise to heights of superhuman bravery, where there is no longer life, or death, or the boundaries of centuries—where there are only eternity and immortality. During those hours Fedor Voganov's life burned away. But the German tanks did not pass.

The entire regiment turned out to meet Voganov's battery when it came back from the forward position. The entire regiment gazed with respect and awe at these people and at these guns, as if they were seeing them for the first time. From that moment on, these men belonged to song and story; these half-charred guns belonged to museums and history. But the gunners themselves appreciated nothing of all this. Gloomily and in silence they walked behind the gun-carriage on which lay the body of their commander.

Fedor Voganov was buried under a poplar, just outside the village. The last words of farewell were uttered. The sound of the last gun salute died away. The clerk struck the name of Lieutenant Voganov from the rolls, and the regiment returned to its regular life of battle.

* * *

But of an evening, in all the batteries, in all the dugouts, in the messroom, at the field-dressing-station, there was only one subject of conversation—the heroic deeds and death of Voganov.

Eye-witnesses were showered with questions, and everyone tried to recall things for themselves.

And those who had never seen Voganov alive were most vexed with themselves: "Just imagine! A person like that lived among us, and I let the chance slip. . . ." And those who had known Voganov tried to recall all their meetings with him, his every word—whether it had anything to do with the matter or not, his habits—"He was keen on racing", one despatch rider said. "He would give anything for a plate of porridge!" recalled the cook.

And although many of these remembrances explained neither the valour nor the grandeur of the hero, nevertheless the men continued their eager reminiscing, as though they wanted to gather up even the tiniest splinters in order to put together a collective portrait of the dead man to imprint in their memories, so that later, when they were old and grey, they would be able to tell their children and their grandchildren about him.

* * *

Thus it was that Fedor Voganov, the hero of the regiment, was reborn and began to live a new life. He was, perhaps, not exactly the curly-headed lad he had been in life, but such as a hero should be in the opinion of his regiment.

Presently someone found a snapshot and showed it to his comrades. And everyone saw in the picture a smart young commander with eyes wide open to life. No one had ever seen him so spruce in the regiment. Then the Secretary of the Party Bureau showed people Voganov's Party membership card. The little photograph was stained with blood, and this blood had caked right on his forehead and temples. And everyone said that this picture was just like him.

Dorokhov, one of the scouts, looked at the picture for a long time and then asked the Secretary to let him have it overnight. All night long he laboured over a large portrait of Voganov and in the morning he showed it to his comrades. And everyone said that the portrait was a good likeness. Someone did say that the nose was not the same. Voganov had been snub-nosed. But the scout retorted heatedly:

"The man lived handsomely and died handsomely, and you want an ugly nose. No! Let him be handsome in all things!"

The portrait was reproduced in the Divisional newspaper and everyone who saw it said to himself: "The living image!" and kept the issue as a souvenir.

Voganov had left few effects behind, but he had left his revolver, a regulation model such as all his comrades had. And although it did not have a silver mounting or even any distinguishing marks, although it was most likely no better than the others, all the commanders suddenly burned with an ardent desire to own and keep it forever, just as though it were some talisman of glory.

"What's the matter with you, haven't you your own revolver?" asked the Lieutenant-Colonel angrily. He had been showered with requests for the revolver. But the Commissar said that, in all justice, the Voganov revolver should be given to the commander whose battery made the best showing. And then a regular competition began in the regiment, with the revolver that Voganov had used to repulse the last attack of the Germans as a prize.

The battery that Voganov had once commanded was reinforced. New people, who had never seen Voganov, entered it. But from the very first day they called themselves "Voganovites", because that was what all of them in the battery called themselves. Nor was the new commander in any way offended. He was even a little proud, as if the immortal glory of the former commander reflected on him too. Yes, he was proud that he was in command of the Voganov battery, of the Voganov battery which everyone knew.

Then reporters began to come flocking, eager for whatever the men could tell them about Voganov, collecting the smallest details of what so recently—one early spring morning—had been in the ordinary course of things, but had already become a thing of story. And throughout the country, news of Fedor Voganov spread, of his brief life, which could be told in four words, and of his death—about which volumes must be written and epics composed.

* * *

The news reached the remote Siberian village where Fedor

Voganov was born. His mother read the article telling of the Lieutenant's heroic feat; but the whole long article that spoke much of valour and heroism told her only one thing: Fedyushka was dead. And she burst into tears. She fell into the arms of her neighbour, crying long and heartbrokenly in her warm embrace. Nor did the neighbour try to console her. She simply said:

"Cry your fill, Stepanovna. You should weep, but you should be proud too!"

And in the village school the old teacher suddenly broke off the lesson and in a voice trembling with emotion said:

"Children! It was at this desk that Fedor Voganov—that immortal hero—once sat as a curly-headed lad."

And all the children looked round at the desk where Vanyushka Gladkikh and Petya Kostikov now sat, swelling and flushing with pride. And for a long time the teacher kept his eyes fixed on the desk, nor was he able to utter another word.

* * *

Then, at a meeting of collective farmers, it was decided to rename the collective farm, the village, and the entire district after Fedor Voganov, and to erect a monument in his memory on the village green. Soon after, a young sculptor came from the city and asked Voganov's old mother for photographs of her son. She collected all that she had—including one showing Fedyushka as a curly-headed schoolboy and the one where he was a smart young commander—but none of these satisfied the sculptor.

He had not come to erect a monument to a mere boy, but to a stern warrior! And he made a monument such as he dreamed of: Fedor's eyes were there, wide open to life, and the curly hair, and the forehead, but it was an adult and grim warrior, just as if Fedor Voganov had continued to live, to grow and mature after death.

I should like to see that monument. I envy Voganov. How much longer have I got to live? Perhaps an hour, perhaps a month, a year, thirty years. . . . But Fedor Voganov will live for ever. He will stand for all time on that green in his native village, ever handsome and ever young. And future generations will recall his brief life and heroic death, and tell their descendants about him. That is immortality.

A SIMPLE LAD

By VENYAMIN KAVERIN

★

THE PHOTOGRAPH was faded. Many a time it had been in the water, but it was still possible to discern the solemn face of a little girl, with large round eyes, a fluffy fringe of hair across her forehead and two long plaits. The girl's name was Darya Krutyakova. Like Vasya, she had been born in 1916. The two children had met in the children's home where both had spent their childhood. They had attended the same lessons and been together in the same class. Vasya had always been intending to run away, but for some reason or other he never had. They had often got to talking together and discussed all sorts of interesting things. She would read to him aloud and could explain anything under the sun—it was really amazing how much she knew! But when they had gone up into the seventh class, Darya had found her parents and gone to live with them in Kiev. On parting, she had given him this photograph.

Then Vasya had been called up and had got into the Navy. In 1935 he had left for the East. He served in various naval launches and then on the monitor *Sun Yat-sen*. Everything had gone well with him except that sometimes he would feel a bit lonely. He had neither father nor mother—he was all alone in the world.

Once he sent a letter to Darya, and got an answer from her. She remembered him and missed him. They began to write to each other regularly, and her letters were so serious and clever that he even began to feel a little uneasy, wondering how it would all turn out when he left the Navy and went to see her again. But then, he thought, everything was bound to be all right, the more so since he himself had come to learn quite a bit through his service in the Navy. He was working in the engine room at Diesel engines.

Once a month, regularly, he would receive a letter from her—a month would pass and there would be a letter, another month, and another letter, and so it went on all through his service in the Far East. Then his term of service in the forces came to an end, and he wrote to her that he would soon be in Kiev.

He took his trousers to the tailor's to have gussets set in them and get them generally smartened up. He bought a few presents for her—a Japanese fan and some light blue silk for a frock. He never drank, but on this occasion he treated himself to dinner in the most expensive restaurant he knew and showed her photograph all round. At night, on the way home, he met a Chinese of his acquaintance and showed him, too, the photograph. The man looked at it and said: "Russian girl good, velly good." And it all seemed so jolly and pleasant.

The next morning the Commissar sent for him and, instead of handing him his documents, gave him a ticket and an assignment to Sevastopol, to serve on the cruiser *Chervona Ukraina* of the Black Sea Fleet.

That was how the war began for Vasya. He took part in a raid on Constanza and helped to evacuate women and children from Mariupol. He saw the Germans sink a barge with two thousand children on it, although the barge flew Red Cross flags both fore and aft, and someone had even attempted to cover over the children with a third flag.

Then Vasya went to fight on land. He fought the Rumanians on the Kotovo Sector, and here the war came comparatively easy to him, for he had been born and bred in the South and knew it all so well—the sea and the river sands, the calls of different birds and the trees. Later on, however, he was transferred to the North, and here the war became more difficult. The North was barren and bleak, and even the sea-gulls there seemed to cry more shrilly and harshly.

But Vasya got used to this life too. He became a first-rate scout, and Major L., famous throughout the Northland, took him into his shock detachment of picked scouts. So it was that Vasya took part in a raid on an enemy transport base near Titovka, when Major L.'s men covered over sixty miles through endless

swamps, dragging one another along on mats made of branches. And all this had to be done in dead silence, without exchanging a single word. The march took longer than they had expected, and the unit fed on cherry blossoms and birch sap so as not to die of hunger. But they held out and eventually smashed the enemy base in a fierce battle. This was a difficult and daring exploit and Vasya—so the Major said—fought and marched with the best, so that he was recommended for a government decoration.

Then Vasya was wounded and spent four months in hospital. After that he was given a month and a half's leave and was offered a trip to a rest home on the Pinega River. But he refused.

He had written several times to the Wireless Committee, requesting them to broadcast his regards to Darya Krutyakova and to ask her to send him her address. But the committee had never replied and never broadcast his greetings, although he had begged them so earnestly to do so. Then, at the Commissar's suggestion, he wrote to the Central Information Bureau at Buguruslan. For a long time there was no reply, but finally he received a short note saying that, to the best of their knowledge, there were three Darya Krutyakovas, and all three of them were born in 1916.

They appended the addresses. Two of the girls lived in the Urals—one in the Molotov Region and the other in the Sverdlov Region, while the third was way out in Oirotia, in the Altai. Again he spoke to the Commissar, who advised him to do all in his power to get in touch with Darya.

"You must have something to fight for," he said, "something very dear to you, without which life would be empty. It makes it easier to fight. Some of us are fighting for our homes, others for our mothers or brothers. In the long run it all boils down to the same thing—mother, brother, children, home. Everything—the whole of life. I tell you, if you find her, you'll fight all the better for it."

The Commissar suggested trying Buguruslan again, because in his first letter Vasya had forgotten to mention Darya's birthplace. But Vasya did not write. Time was passing, and it was already

too late to write. He decided to spend his leave in looking himself.

He packed his things. Got his pay. The silk that he had bought for her in Vladivostok was gone—it had been stolen. But the fan remained, a beautiful folding fan, with a lovely garden painted on it. There were singing birds perched on trees under the rising sun, and a Japanese lady strolling in the garden with a bunch of flowers in her hand.

And so he left. It was a difficult trip to make, and he had to change trains frequently on the way, but there was plenty of time for him to chew over everything that he saw. This was his first visit to the rear since the war had begun. Once, when he put up for the night in a barracks, he met a boy of about sixteen, who worked as foreman in a munitions factory. That was really amazing. And the lad spoke so readily and intelligently about everything. It was quite obvious that he knew as much about Diesel engines as did Vasya himself. Then again he had occasion to speak with a militiaman who had adopted two war orphans—that was also something worth thinking over. At a station called Svecha, Vasya helped a woman with her baggage. She had seen four of her sons off to the front and was now starting work again in a factory—at seventy-two years of age! Up to now he had only read about such things in the newspapers. But now he saw it all with his own eyes. Saw people hard at work, assembling evacuated factories right out in the open steppe, regardless of the bitter frosts. All this was an eye-opener to Vasya, and he had an inkling that this was what the Commissar had been trying to tell him about. But the nearer he came to the place where he hoped to meet Darya, the less thought he gave to it all.

The first Darya lived in a village, twenty miles from the railway. To get there he would either have to take a cart or hike it. He set out on foot and, as he strode along, he tried to picture to himself how it would all turn out. He would burst unexpectedly into the room, and she would not recognise him at first. And then, all of a sudden she would realise who it was. Once, in the cinema, he had seen a film about the same sort of thing.

According to the address, Darya was living at a home for

children who had been evacuated from Leningrad. He had no trouble in getting there—it was housed in the local school.

A few little girls were playing on the doorstep. He went up to them and asked:

"Does Comrade Krutyakova live here?"

And he felt as if someone had caught hold of his heart and squeezed it, and then let it go, and it had started to beat again ever so quickly.

"No, I'm afraid not," said one of the girls.

"What do you mean—doesn't live here?" he stammered. "Her name is Darya Matveyevna."

"Oh, yes, that's right, there is a Darya Matveyevna here—she cooks for the children's home."

In the kitchen a bunch of women were crowded round the range. The girls stood in the doorway and called out several times through the hubbub:

"Darya Matveyevna! Someone to see you!"

Then a tall woman with light ginger hair and plump bare arms turned round and asked in surprise:

"To see me?"

She was holding a pot in her hands and couldn't find a place to put it down. Vasya stood there and stared at her.

Later on, too, he could not take his eyes off her, while she was persuading him to stay to dinner and trying to recollect all her relatives and friends by the name of Krutyakova. She was very nice, so strong and good-natured. But she wasn't Darya, that is, not his Darya. And that was the important thing.

He spent that night at the children's home and the next day continued on his travels. The second Darya lived in the neighbouring region, but far enough away, nevertheless, to take him all of eight days to get there. He went part of the way by river and the rest by train.

Shaggy, age-old firs, with branches like the paws of some wild beast, grew right down the middle of the street, and all round the settlement stretched the gloomy, wild forest-lands.

The watchman showed him the house he was looking for and he knocked at the door. A boy of about six peeped out through

the window and said that his mother was not in. Vasya was sure that Darya could not have such a big boy, but somehow it seemed to him that the boy bore a slight resemblance to her. Perhaps they were relatives, he thought. And to make quite sure, he waited there until evening—the boy had said that his mother would come home from the hospital at around eight. They chatted awhile, and Vasya showed him all kinds of interesting things—an Iron Cross which he himself had taken off a dead German officer, and a Finnish knife with an inscription in Finnish. He was a good little kid.

Then the mother came in—a tired-eyed woman who looked about forty, although the letter from Buguruslan had stated that she was born in 1916. Krutyakova was not her born name at all, she had acquired it by marriage. Her husband had been a doctor, like herself, but he had been killed at the front. She had been notified of his death only a few days before.

So now Vasya was left with only the far-distant Altai to go to. But he decided to write there first, to make quite sure that the real Darya lived there.

To cut a long story short, he did not find her. He was unable to trace her whereabouts, and he was dogged by the thought that, if he were killed, she would never even know that he had tried to find her, or kept the fan for her.

* * *

. . . He had put up for the night in the Collective Farmer's Club of a little town. But he could not sleep, and lay quietly on his bed, smoking and thinking.

He had covered over six hundred miles by train and on foot —and all for nothing. His leave had been simply wasted.

But no sooner had this thought crossed his mind than something tugged at his heart and he heard a voice deep down inside him: 'No, not wasted. . . .'

'Just think, Vasya,' the voice went on, 'how much you have seen during the last few days. The whole land has opened up before you, and you've seen with your own eyes all that you have been fighting for so zealously and well. You've seen how our

people are forging victory with hard work, in spite of all their suffering—how one great force is raising them and leading them on—every living soul of them. Do you remember the sixteen-year-old lad who had become foreman of a munitions factory, and the militiaman who adopted the two orphan children and the old lady who had seen her four sons off to the front? You were looking for your Darya, and you found the whole country. Remember this when you return to the front. And tell your comrades all about it, Vasya.'

He paced the room the whole night through, and he was no longer sorry that he had gone in search of Darya. And in the morning he found her. This is how it happened.

He had written another letter to the Altai and, as an extra precaution, he decided to send it by registered post. But there was a queue in the post office and, while waiting, he glanced idly over the notices posted on the walls.

Then his eyes wandered to a small sheet of paper tacked to the frame of the counter window, somewhat apart from the lists of regulations and government decrees. It was written in big, well-formed handwriting, and ran as follows: "Will anybody who has any knowledge of the whereabouts of Matvey Petrovich and Maria Ivanovna Krutyakova, evacuated from Kiev, please communicate to the following address . . ." His turn in the queue had passed long ago, but he still stood there in front of the counter window. So Darya was looking for Matvey Petrovich, that was her father, and Maria must be her mother or perhaps her aunt. He had intended to post his letter, pack his things and leave immediately. And all the time she had been right there, within a stone's throw of him, and had he not gone into the post-office he would never have traced her.

He took out his notebook and, with trembling hands, made a note of the address. Then he went out onto the porch and lit a cigarette. After that he paid a visit to the barber's. He made a point of having a wash and brush-up every time he was about to meet one of the Daryas, although this was not always easy while travelling.

He went back to the Club and put on his new trousers, the

ones with the gussets in them. He had hardly worn them, for he had been keeping them for just such a special occasion. He took out the fan and put it carefully in his knapsack, separately from the other things. There would be no mistake this time. It was his own Darya. But as he walked, his throat was parched and dry, and all the time he wanted to sit down and have a smoke.

He found her in a new brick building, the only brick building in the whole town. She was sitting on her bed in a large bare dormitory, writing something in a notebook which lay upon her knees.

Only when he softly exclaimed: "Darya!" did she look up.

She had grown thinner and was no longer the same little girl he had known at school. But she still had the plaits and the fringe of hair across her forehead, and her eyes, were, if anything, bigger and rounder than ever.

"Darya!" he repeated. "Why don't you say anything? Don't you remember me?"

Slowly she closed her notebook, got up from the bed and came towards him. And only when she was really close up to him did she recognise him.

Vasya spent only three days there—he had to get back to his unit. The other girls who shared the room with Darya saw to it that the couple should be alone together as much as possible. Once they walked the whole night through and felt incredibly glad to be together, gladder than they could ever feel again in all the rest of their lives.

Then he left. At parting she told him:

"I'll be waiting for you. I'm sure you'll come back. I'm sure you won't be hurt or killed. . . ."

* * *

. . . This was the story told me by Vasya Chekin, a rosy-cheeked lad with a "For Valour" Medal pinned to his breast. The brigade of marines was leaving for the front. It was forming up, waiting for the arrival of a delegate from the Defence Commissariat. The bright northern morning was coming into its own in all its

cool, airy beauty. The wet, wooden planks were steaming in the warm sun.

A poster was hanging on the long, narrow barrack-wall with the slogan: "Victory or Death," and I asked the cameraman at my side (who was a friend of mine) to take Vasya Chekin's picture as he stood there under the poster.

THE GIRL WHO LED THE WAY

By VADIM KOZHEVNIKOV

★

"THIS WAY, please."

Her escort, an officer of the company of scouts, showed her into a hut.

"I'm afraid you will have to wait quite a while," he said. "You had better make yourself at home."

She cast a quick glance round the room, at the sleeping men on the floor covered with their greatcoats.

"It's a way we have in our profession, you know," the Lieutenant said following her glance. "We turn day into night and vice versa. Here's a comfortable seat."

The Lieutenant saluted her and left the room.

Strictly speaking he should not have saluted her. After all, she had no marks of distinction on the tabs of her greatcoat. The Lieutenant saluted her more out of courtesy, the usual politeness a man shows to a girl, than as a officer to one of his rank.

The girl sat down on a bench and looked out of the window.

The window-pane was covered with white leaves of rare design, fashioned by the frost.

An hour passed, two hours, three hours, and still she sat there on the bench. From time to time a hacking cough shook her whole frame; bending almost double she pressed a mitten to her lips in an effort to suppress it. After each spasm she leaned back exhausted, gasping for breath, her head resting against the wall, her swollen lips trembling. Her large, wide-open eyes dimmed with pain but she wiped away her tears with her mitten.

It had grown quite dark.

The white leaves on the darkening window-pane gleamed in the moonlight with dry, variegated sparks.

The Lieutenant entered the room. Not seeing anybody in the gloom, he asked:

"Are you there, Citizen?"

"I'm here," she replied in a muffled voice.

The Lieutenant bent down and began to wake the sleeping men.

Calling Chevakov, the Squad Commander, aside, he entered into a long whispered conversation with him, evidently giving him instructions, and then, raising his voice so that everybody could hear, he said:

"Take two men with you, that is the instruction of the Battalion Commander. You are to be in command for general purposes." Then nodding in the direction of the girl, he went on: "But when it comes to action you've got to take her orders."

"Very well," the Squad Commander replied.

They hurried through their supper, not even lighting the lamp. The girl hardly ate anything, swallowing very carefully as though each morsel caused her pain.

Seeing she had eaten so little, the Squad Commander said:

"You shouldn't let this job of ours worry you, a square meal before taking a stroll is one of our first rules."

"I'm not worrying at all," the girl answered softly.

They made their preparations silently, quickly.

Noticing that the girl was carefully muffling her neck in a coarse woollen scarf, Chevakov said:

"Afraid you'll catch cold, eh?"

The girl made no reply. They went out into the street.

A big full moon hung in the sky. The snow was dazzling.

Chevakov, muttering a curse at the moon, walked in front. Glancing over his shoulder, he said to the girl:

"I'll take charge until we get through the German lines. After that we're at your service."

The girl walked between privates Ignatov and Ramishvili. Crossing a bit of open ground the men glanced at their companion, but they could hardly recognise her in the bright moonlight which flooded the field like a searchlight and transfigured everything.

Small, in felt boots, she seemed not so much to be wearing as wrapped round in her greatcoat, looking just like a youngster

wearing his father's coat. And her eyes were so splendid that both men felt confused and turned their heads away.

When the girl slipped, Ignatov rushed to help her up.

"Let me take your arm," he said.

The girl stopped and asked in a startled voice:

"Why, what for?"

Ignatov felt himself blush in spite of the frost. Ramishvili tried to help him out.

"You see," he said, "in the Caucasus, where I come from, it's the custom for men to be chivalrous to women."

"But at the front," the girl replied gruffly, "you're supposed to keep your minds fixed on other things."

Ramishvili wanted to say something in reply but Chevakov cut him short.

"Stop jawing there!" he ordered curtly. "You've evidently forgotten where you are."

They crossed the German lines about midnight. They entered a gloomy, forbidding wood, with scraggy shadows spreading over the snow. Now the girl led the way. She walked on, briskly, with a sort of mincing gait, her hands thrust into the cuffs of her greatcoat. The track came to an end. They crossed a gully up to their waists in snow. The hollow beyond it they had to cross on all fours. It took them a long time to do it—about an hour and a half. Then they reached a clearing in the woods. After that they skirted a small village—a black ugly blotch against the sparkling, virgin snow. And after that they again had to wade across untrodden snow, picking their way with difficulty through it, for it was as crisp as sand.

The one thing that alarmed them was the girl's cough. In the intense, rare silence of the frosty night her dry, hacking cough could be heard a long way off and was liable to spoil everything. When they came within reach of their destination, Chevakov said:

"You had better get into that hayrick and wait for us. We'll figure things out for ourselves."

"Very well," she whispered. She looked almost done as she stood there, one woollen mitten pressed close to her mouth.

They fixed the time when they had to be back and then dispersed in different directions.

Hours passed. A grey dawn cast a pale, dim light over the ground.

The first to get back was Ignatov. Ramishvili showed up next. He was bubbling over with excitement.

"There's information for you! My, I'd like to hug her for it."

"You would, would you, but would she agree. . . ." Ignatov growled. Taking a sidelong glance at the hayrick, he said diffidently:

"I wonder whether she's married. What do you think?"

Chevakov turned up suddenly, noiselessly.

"Come on, you chaps," he said, "it's time to turn back."

The Squad Commander was delighted. "There's information for you!" he exclaimed. "The Battalion Commander will simply be staggered. He never dreamed of getting such material."

They made their way back by a different route. Again the girl led the way, her hands in the cuffs of her greatcoat. And just as before, every now and then, she would press her woollen mittens to her lips, trying to smother the spells of coughing.

The men looked proudly at the girl who led them. Tender thoughts took shape in their minds, in their hearts—thoughts which men express only once in their lives, to the one person they love dearly.

Near the highway leading to Zhimolost they saw some villagers clearing the road of snow. German soldiers—their heads and shoulders wrapped in blankets and women's shawls—were guarding them. In a ditch by the roadside lay a woman. Her knees were bent almost to her stomach. Her face was smeared with clots of frozen blood.

Ramishvili grit his teeth and took out a hand grenade. Ignatov unslung his automatic rifle. Chevakov said gruffly:

"Open fire when I give the signal."

Suddenly the girl exclaimed, as loudly as her sore throat permitted her:

"There isn't going to be any signal!"

"What do you mean?"

"What I say. Do you want them to wipe the earth with you?"

"They?" Chevakov said in surprise. "Twelve lousy Fritzes! We'll knock them on the head in no time. . . ."

"It shall be as I say: nothing doing."

"Shut up!" Turning away from the girl Chevakov snapped out: "I m giving orders here!"

But the girl was not to be baulked. In between her fits of coughing she managed to shout out:

"I'm not going to allow you to run any risk for the sake of that scum! The information you have is too important! Do you hear?"

"There's no risk at all," Chevakov said undeterred. "Come on, chaps."

The girl barred their way.

"Chuck it," Chevakov said roughly, taking a step in her direction. "What's the idea? Can't you see—our own people are suffering!"

"Don't you dare," the girl whispered. "Just try to start something and I'll yell." She dashed off to one side.

Chevakov levelled his revolver and then, without looking at his men, he said moodily:

"We'll have to leave things as they are, I suppose. That skirt'll be in hysterics if we attempt anything. She'll bosh up the whole show."

"She's a swine," Ignatov said bitterly.

"Yes, a regular hussy," Ramishvili confirmed and spat on the snow.

The men trudged along in silence. The very sight of their companion aroused bitter feelings in them. Every fold in her greatcoat which had seemed so precious before, now aroused revulsion, and once, when she slipped, nobody even so much as moved a finger to help her.

The sun was already high when they reached headquarters. Chevakov said, looking askance at the girl:

"You can hardly drag your feet along now. You'd better go to sleep. We'll do the reporting without you. Gratitude, we'll leave to our commanding officer. As far as we are concerned no word exists that could express what we feel about you."

The girl nodded her head and, stooping her shoulders, stumbled off alone in the direction of the hut.

Chevakov reported the results of their mission to the commander of the scouting battalion. The information obtained by the men proved to be extremely valuable; then and there it was transmitted in code by wire to the Commander of the Army Corps. When that had been done the Commander of the Battalion asked:

"By the way, where is Nina Bogoradova? How is she?"

"Is that the one who acted as our guide?" Chevakov asked. "I suppose she's fast asleep. . . . She was enough to make anyone sick. . . ." Laughing contemptuously, he gave a detailed account of the incident with the forced labour squad they had met on the road.

But, strange as it may seem, the more bitterly Chevakov spoke about the girl, the more angrily flushed the Battalion Commander's face became; and he breathed hard, in quick, short gasps, as though somebody were sticking pins into him and he had to bear the pain in silence.

Chevakov finished his narrative. For a long time the Battalion Commander paced the hut without saying a word, not paying the slightest attention to the men, who stood looking at him in surprise. Turning suddenly in their direction, he said in a muffled voice:

"This girl, Nina Bogoradova, was hanged by the Germans in the village of Zhimolost a couple of days ago. She was rescued, just in the nick of time, by some guerrillas who made a sudden raid on the village. Didn't you see the marks the rope made on her neck? And also the way she coughs and spits blood? And this sick, wounded girl conducted herself in a way you should have taken as an example. For all we know she may have seen her parents in that squad on the road, but she knew that the information you had obtained was more valuable than any dozen German soldiers. And here you go imagining God knows what. . . . Fine heroes you are!" And, making a sign with his hand, the Battalion Commander said: "You can go."

The men left the battalion headquarters. Outside in the street

they stopped. Chevakov had turned as pale as a sheet. Ignatov's lips were quivering. But Ramishvili, fumbling nervously at the collar of his tunic as though something were choking him, blurted out impulsively:

"Come on, you chaps. We've shown ourselves up for a prize bunch of fools, I must say! We've got to ask her pardon, at once!"

Ignatov whispered bitterly:

"No, fellows, merely asking her pardon won't mend matters."

"We shall have to ask her to forgive us just the same," Chevakov said slowly. "But, in my opinion, we'll do it this way. There's a unit starting out shortly—heading for the village of Zhimolost. We'll have to put off sleeping to another time. I think you'll agree with me that it wouldn't be a bad idea to go back and have a look at those Fritzes who tried to. . . ."

"Yes, we could do that now," Ramishvili whispered excitedly. "We're free now to do what we like. We've submitted our report and our hands are untied."

"Silence in the ranks," Chevakov cut in in a business-like tone. "We'll put things right with her somehow. When we get back we'll make ourselves spick and span and ask her forgiveness in regular style. Am I right?"

"Absolutely," the two others agreed.

Slinging their automatic rifles over their shoulders they made for the fringe of the woods from which the unit was to launch an attack on the village of Zhimolost.

The sun shone, the snow sparkled, dazzling their eyes.

THE BIRTHDAY

By KONSTANTIN TRENYEV

★

THE OFFICE in which Ivan Dmitriyevich worked was very noisy. All day long it was crowded with clients, frequently of the type that do not mince words. Ivan Dmitriyevich, who suffered from heart trouble, was sorely tried at times. His desk stood by the window, and when the din grew too disturbing Ivan Dmitriyevich would lay down his pen and look out at the wintry scene, at the snow-covered square that dropped sharply down to the big river now asleep under its snowy counterpane edged with the yellow rushes, and at the dark forests beyond.

But to-day there was no time to admire the landscape. The Food Commission had been in conference yesterday and now resources had urgently to be mobilized. To-morrow he would have to report on the position with regard to the firewood stocks.

And the day before yesterday Ivan Dmitriyevich had received official notification that his only son Mitya had been killed in action.

It had come with the rest of the mail and Ivan Dmitriyevich had opened the envelope mechanically. But when he had begun to read what was written on the slip of paper bearing the Defence Commissariat stamp the letters had suddenly danced queerly before his eyes. The room had been as noisy as usual, some woman in a red beret had been having a heated altercation with one of the clerks. But all of a sudden everything seemed to have become quite quiet and the red beret had floated away into the distance.

Ivan Dmitriyevich had made a great effort and everything had settled in its place again. The hubbub in the room had gradually returned.

No one had paid any attention to Ivan Dmitriyevich. Every-

body had been engrossed in his own work. Presently a member of the public had come over for some information. He had opened his ledger and found what was required. He had been amazed to see that nothing had changed, that people and things were just the same. He had looked about him. There was the dark green wall with the familiar stains, the same ice-encrusted window on his right.

And suddenly a wave of inconsolable grief had swept over him. He had uttered a faint groan and, raising his head, slowly fixed his eyes on the ceiling. Just then Yezhov, the head of the personnel department, had come over and said something to him. Ivan Dmitriyevich had not caught the words. Yezhov, who was a great wag, had winked one of his small black eyes and said in a loud voice:

"Day dreaming, old chap? Now who could it be, I wonder? Not Marusya, I hope? Married all these years and still dreaming of your wife. You'd better be careful or I'll tell her!"

Yezhov had guffawed and given Ivan Dmitriyevich a playful dig in the ribs.

Ivan Dmitriyevich had looked at him with unseeing eyes. Ah, yes, his wife. She would have to be told! How could he do it?

She had been sick for several days now. She had been taken ill just before the New Year and only yesterday had got up and gone to work. Before that they had both nursed a secret anxiety, studiously kept from one another: Mitya had not written for a long time. And such an important occasion was approaching: Mitya would be twenty next week.

Mitya's birthday had always been the big event of the year. The whole family always prepared for it long in advance. The parents bought presents and the mother baked a birthday cake. Mitya, too, always had a little surprise for both of them. For two years now the occasion had had to be celebrated without Mitya. Somehow, though, he had always managed to send a letter, so that when the parents and their guests had sat down at the table the envelope addressed in his handwriting would be lying beside the birthday cake.

Of course the precious letter would be read aloud several times

in the course of the evening. Kiril Ilyich, an old friend of the family, would always listen in silence, stroking his walrus moustache, which was now faintly tinged with grey, and sometimes brushing away a tear from his fierce grey eyes. Then he would glance about him in search of something to break for good luck as he had done ever since Mitya had been a tiny tot. But now it was wartime and crockery was scarce.

Now Marya Nikolayevna was preparing for Mitya's birthday again. And there would be no letter. . . .

Ivan Dmitriyevich glanced at the clock on the wall. It was two o'clock. Three hours from now he would be home. Marya Nikolayevna would be waiting for him with the table laid for dinner. He would enter the house and . . .

Ivan Dmitriyevich sighed heavily and applied himself to his work. The next time he looked at the clock it was four. How quickly time was flying to-day. . . .

And now the day was over. If only something would detain him, some meeting or conference. But no. The clerks were clearing their desks. In another few minutes the office would be empty and he would be alone. Ivan Dmitriyevich sat motionless until the door closed behind the last employee. Then he tried to rise but his legs gave way under him and he fell back heavily onto his chair. His head dropped on to the table and he gave way to a paroxysm of grief. When his grief had spent itself for the moment, he rose and prepared slowly for home. He felt calmer now. It would be easier to break the news to his wife.

On the way home he passed as usual through the city park. The benches were piled high with soft powdery snow. Acting on the impulse of the moment Ivan Dmitriyevich turned off the main path and walked to a little square whose benches had been lately cleared of snow. He sat down and glanced around him. Good God, how familiar and dear it all was. Why, on that very bench over there he had proposed to Marya Nikolayevna. That was many, many years ago. The chestnuts had been in bloom, he remembered, and their large candle-like blossoms had seemed to be lit up for the occasion. The air had been filled with the sweet scent of grasses and a cool fragrant breeze had been wafted

from the river. He saw the pair of them again a year or two later, sitting together under the lime tree a little further down the path with Mitya snug in his pram beside them. He saw Mitya aged three and four, romping and playing in this same park, and later, a lad walking down the paths, a strapping youngster with a dreamy, slightly wistful look on his sensitive face.

Life had followed its measured course from year to year. Nature had changed from season to season and the modest desires and dreams of these simple folk had changed too. One day last summer, while passing through the park, Ivan Dmitriyevich had thought of all that had been associated with it in his life and had fallen to musing about a time when the war would be over and his Mitya would walk down this self-same alley with the girl he loved. And then presently, under the same shady lime tree, another perambulator would stand there, and again he and Marya Nikolayevna would sit on the bench beside it and watch with pride and tenderness the little creature slumbering peacefully within. And their life, transmitted to another life more precious even than their own, would flow gently along, no longer the swift sparkling stream it had been, but a slow, deep, joyous current. And now everything was shattered. . . . The stream was dried up and empty and the hand of death was upon everything.

Ivan Dmitriyevich's heart was like lead in his breast. For now he would have to go home and plunge a knife into his wife's heart.

Ivan Dmitriyevich knew how brave she was, how she could hide her grief and find the strength to comfort and cheer others.

That is how it had always been. They had both been troubled by Mitya's long silence, but each had striven manfully to hide what each really felt from the other. Just the other day she had said:

"There are folks who haven't heard for months at a stretch, and some who haven't even since the very beginning. We must be patient."

That morning, before work, they had exchanged a few words about the preparations for Mitya's birthday. Contrary to tradition, they had actually disagreed on one point. Usually they invited friends over to spend the evening, but this year Marya

Nikolayevna had suggested that they celebrate alone. Times had changed, she said. Ivan Dmitriyevich, on the other hand, had been of the opinion that it was at difficult times like these that one could derive comfort and satisfaction from the society of one's intimate friends. But Marya Nikolayevna, still weak from her recent illness, had insisted, and they had compromised by deciding to invite Kiril Ilyich only.

After a while Ivan Dmitriyevich rose and walked slowly homeward. Passing through the gates of the little park he found it hard to believe that less than nine hours had passed since he had walked down this same path on his way to work that very morning. He felt very old and tired.

It was but a few blocks to his house. Usually he covered the distance without noticing it, but this evening the road seemed interminable. His legs seemed weighted with lead, his breath came in short gasps as though he were hauling some heavy load. Passers-by turned to stare at him, and when he turned the corner and saw his little brown cottage with the three windows, the low wooden fence topped by the snow-covered crowns of his young apple trees, he made up his mind. He would not tell her to-day. To-morrow perhaps, or, better still, when Mitya's birthday had passed. He couldn't take that away from her. Afterwards . . . well, afterwards he would see. Let that day remain a bright memory in her life. Or at least the phantom of a happy day. There would always be time to break the terrible news to her. No need to hurry. Perhaps even Kiril Ilyich ought not to know, he was such an impressionable creature, he would be bound to give himself away.

Having come to a decision he felt easier in his mind and he entered the house with a step that was almost light, prepared to face his wife without shrinkling, but the sight of her pale-drawn face gave him a stab of pain. How ill and worn she looked! Even her fine blue eyes had lost their lustre. How had he failed to notice it before? Her illness had indeed wasted her and instead of taking it easy she had undertaken extra work. She ate her dinner quickly and went out as usual before he had time to protest.

Thus the days passed, and the nearer Mitya's birthday approached, the more keenly Ivan Dmitriyevich felt that it would be the most ghastly day in his life. In fact he did not know how he would be able to endure it. How could he raise his glass and drink to Mitya's health without betraying his secret?

He had thought that by the time the day arrived his pain would have abated somewhat, but instead it seemed to grow sharper. Perhaps that was because he was bearing it alone. Silence is unendurable when one's heart is bursting with grief. He simply had to share the burden with someone, someone for whom it would not be too hard to bear. He went to Kiril Ilyich. The two men shed bitter masculine tears together in the latter's lonely apartment. Kiril Ilyich agreed that the mother should not be told until after the birthday.

Why hurry?

A photograph of Mitya stood on Kiril Ilyich's table.

"The image of Marusya," said Ivan Dmitriyevich. Then with a bitter laugh he added: "They say boys who take after their mother are lucky."

Kiril Ilyich's fierce blue eyes widened. "I don't know about that," he said sternly, "but I do know that any lad who took after a woman like Marya Nikolayevna was bound to do big things."

He blew his nose noisily.

"He took after you too for that matter. I don't believe he ever told a lie in his life."

"Yes," said Ivan Dmitriyevich softly, "he was like that from childhood."

"That was the result of a good upbringing, my friend," said Kiril Ilyich.

"I don't know what it was. The lad put even his father to shame on occasion. You know how you can sometimes let slip a white lie without actually being aware of it. Whenever that happened, Mitya would look at you with those serious eyes of his and you'd find yourself blushing like a schoolboy. He was always busy with his own thoughts. I often wondered what went on in his mind. But he did not confide much in

anyone, even in his mother, though he was so deeply attached to her."

Ivan Dmitriyevich stared in silence at the portrait of his son. The eyes were large and full of wonder, but the lips were tightly compressed. And now they were closed forever. He would never know what his son had thought about.

The birthday drew nearer and nearer. The thought that he would have to carry his dark secret through it terrified him. He had never had any secrets from his wife throughout their long life together. He wished that the awful day would never come. But it came all too soon.

In the morning Ivan Dmitriyevich and Marya Nikolayevna congratulated one another tenderly on their son's birthday. Then Ivan Dmitriyevich hurried off to work much relieved that the first ordeal had passed. True, Marya Nikolayevna's sunken eyes had not shone with their usual serene happiness—the birthday was here and still no letter—but there had been an air of proud resignation in her bearing.

The short winter's day ended all too quickly. The dreaded moment had arrived. Ivan Dmitriyevich called for Kiril Ilyich on his way home, for he felt that he had not the strength to enter his home alone that evening, and take his seat at the birthday table without a confidant.

When they arrived Ivan Dmitriyevich congratulated his wife once more and kissed her pale lips.

Kiril Ilyich solemnly presented her with a bunch of flowers and began to speak rapidly about the weather.

They drank to Mitya's health, to the country and the front. Everything went smoothly and normally. Over the table hung a lamp shaded by an old blue silk shade, and across the floor a strip of coloured carpet had been laid for the occasion. Flowers stood in a bowl before Mitya's portrait. It was a clear night and a shaft of moonlight shone through the lace curtains onto the floor.

They sat at the table talking quietly about this and that, barely mentioning Mitya. Presently Ivan Dmitriyevich rose to help his wife clear the table. In doing so he stepped into the patch of moonlight on the carpet and suddenly a groan burst from him

His body seemed to crumple up as though he had been struck a heavy blow on the chest and he dropped onto the nearest chair. His wife and friend rushed over to him, but covering his face with his hands he wept like a child, muttering piteously over and over again.

"Mitenka . . . Mitenka's gone. . . ."

Recovering his composure he turned helplessly to Marya Nikolayevna and tried to comfort her. But she was standing over him with the medicine glass letting the tears course down her sunken cheeks.

"Now, now, Vanya," she whispered softly and tenderly.

Kiril Ilyich stood by the window staring fixedly at the silvery-hued snowhills and wiping his moustache, which the tears wet faster than he could dry.

"It's a week since I got the notification," Ivan Dmitriyevich at last said haltingly, " . . . but I just couldn't. . . ."

Without a word Marya Nikolayevna went to the chest of drawers and took out a letter from the back of one of them.

"Here," she said, "this is Mitya's letter. His last. I got it just before the New Year. He told me to read it to you afterwards. . . . It's all there."

Ivan Dmitriyevich took the letter and was about to read it. But his hands trembled so violently that Kiril Ilyich took it from him and, putting on his spectacles, began to read aloud. He read unevenly; for a while his voice was firm and coherent and then the words seemed to choke him and he shook his silvery head, wiped his glasses and went on reading again clearly and almost angrily.

"My darling mother!" began the letter. "You must read this letter to yourself at first. I shall tell you why later on.

"I am writing to you in these joyous days of victory.

"The sun is shining into the ward and onto my bed as I write. Everything is snow-white about me—the walls, the ceiling, the bed-linen. Beyond the windows everything is white too—white smoke curls up from the white roof. And somehow I have been thinking all morning of the white apple blossoms in our garden. Every tiny vein in them used to be bursting with life, every seed

carried new life in it. And they stood with their heavy branches bowed to the ground rather sadly, I always thought.

"And now as I watch the smoke swirl lightly and merrily skywards my mind is full of reflection on life and death.

"I have been on the field of death for almost two years. Many a time I have gone out to meet Death face to face. . . . But now I shall not elude him any more, I fear.

"This letter will have to be short for he is hurrying me. It will not be too coherent: for he disturbs me. But of Death, more later. I want to speak to you, mother dear, of Life.

"I used to have many cherished ambitions. I do not know whether I should have realised even a small fraction of them had I been destined to live the usual span. Failure and bitter disillusionment awaited me, I know.

"But there was one ambition I cherished above all. I wanted to do something big, something for which my country would be everlastingly grateful, that would give you and father reason to be proud of me. This, I felt, would be the supreme joy that would make life worth while.

"But when I was in my twentieth year I realised that my dream was not to be realised. I was just a plain chap like millions of others, not destined to do more than the average. The sphere of endeavour I had chosen—history and philosophy—offered no opportunities for exploits or glory, not immediate prospects at any rate. It was sad, but it could not be helped. My life dream remained unattainable.

"And now it has come to me by itself. I have done something, something big, for which my country will revere my name after my death and of which you, my dears, will be proud.

"I know now that of all the sacrifices of which man is capable, there is none greater than to give one's life for one's country. My dear ones, I say this not because I wish to console you. This letter is a sort of confession from a loving heart, a heart now overflowing with joy. This heart will soon cease to beat. But its very last heartbeats will be full of radiant happiness for you, for my country—a happiness that will outlive the beating of my heart. I want you to feel something of this happiness too.

"I know, my dears, that pain will obliterate the happiness at first. I fear that the shock may affect father's heart and that is why I am writing to you first, mother, for you were always the stronger of the two, you will prepare him. I know you will both weep bitter tears over me and long for me. But do not grieve, my loved ones. For I am happy.

"Others will give you all the details about me. They will show you my grave. Soon you will come and weep at the grave of your son, for that is the bitter right of parenthood. But to rejoice and take pride in it, that is the exalted right of the privileged few.

"I have always passionately loved my country, its rivers and valleys, every blade of grass on its meadows.

"I have pledged this love with my blood, the blood you gave me.

"There is so much I should like to say to you now! But it is already hard for me to write. I shall rest a while. . . .

"Now I feel better. The nurse wanted to take my writing pad from me, but I begged her to let me have it a little while longer. My strength is ebbing, but my happiness glows brightly within me.

"I still feel strong enough to say a few more words to you. It will soon grow dark. In the twilight I shall lie thinking of you.

"I can see you both before me in our living room, with the tiled stove and your favourite flowers and the old sofa with the humped back. How I loved to sit there with you, mother, of an evening, when I was little! How clearly I remember it all! I remember too that my birthday is approaching. I know that I shall be gone long before that day comes round. But, mother dear, do not tell father until after my birthday. Let him feel that he is with me at least one more day. And on that day of quiet domestic joy, remember, both of you, that bright days have dawned for our people, for the enemy is mortally wounded.

"One thing more I should like to say: I am leaving my country bruised and ravaged. I leave her with my thirst for vengeance still unquenched.

"More and more hundreds and thousands of bandit corpses

will yet befoul our earth, rivers of their evil blood will yet be shed, but that is not enough. They shall not be absolved so easily. Their punishment is still to come. . . . I shall not be fortunate enough to see the new life we have won. But to have given my life for it is a greater joy.

"Farewell, my darlings, I kiss you on the lips that guided me along the path to happiness. I kiss your eyes that gazed upon me with such loving tenderness. Remember me to our friends and above all to our faithful Uncle. . . ."

Kiril Ilyich's voice broke at that point. Marya Nikolayevna finished the letter for him.

"So our Mitenka came to us after all," she said, putting away the letter. "He will be with us always."

The moon went down. Mitya's Day was over, and all through the long winter night till dawn the three sat talking softly as though afraid lest they might wake someone.

IN THE DARK

By FEDOR KNORRE

★

ALL THREE men in the tiny corner ward—tank-driver Dimokurov, the heavy middle-aged sailor who was always called Uncle Petya, and Vatulin, the little plump-cheeked gunner—had known for a long time now that they would never go back to the front. They had resigned themselves to this fact. The intense reality of their life in the front line had begun to fade from their minds, and its place was beginning to be taken by that other reality, that strange, half-forgotten civilian life where people went to work every day, where trams clanged and streets were full of men in civilian clothes, and women.

The hospital was far away from the homes of all the three, and for a long time none of them had any visitors. But one day Uncle Petya, who already had the free run of the corridors and stairs, came panting into the ward, pushing open the door with his crutches. He silently handed a folded note to Dimokurov. He was followed by Vatulin.

Dimokurov extricated the sounder of his two heavily bandaged hands from beneath the bedclothes, took the note and began to open it, holding it clumsily against his chest with his bandaged fingers. Leaning on their crutches, Uncle Petya and Vatulin watched him intently, their eyes glued to the note.

"Shall I read it for you?" Uncle Petya said.

Dimokurov said nothing. His face contracted with pain as he raised himself slightly on one elbow and turned the note to the light. As he read it they could see white patches stand out on his cheekbones.

The note contained only a few words, but Dimokurov stared at it for a long time. Uncle Petya and Vatulin exchanged glances.

"I'll bet it's his girl," Vatulin said, carefully fingering a scratch on the polished surface of one of his crutches.

"I haven't got a girl," Dimokurov said. He lay back on the pillow, folded the note in two and crumpled it in his hand.

"Well, you've got a visitor anyway, and that's something," Vatulin said. "She's waiting downstairs. We spoke to her." He fingered the scratch again. "She looked rather upset."

Dimokurov moved uneasily in his bed and frowned. "You'll have to tell her she can't see me," he said. "At least not now anyway. Some other time, perhaps."

"Some other time!" said Uncle Petya indignantly. "Why, she's leaving to-night. She's going away. She's got her railway ticket."

"Let her go then. Tell her anything you like. Please, Uncle Petya. Do me a favour and get rid of her. You know how it is. I can't have anyone see me like this."

Uncle Petya said nothing. Vatulin shrugged his shoulders. "Why shouldn't anyone see you," he said. "Everyone knows you've been wounded, and damned seriously wounded too. But you'll get all right. I'd change places with you any day. Honest I would. The doctor says your hands are healing beautifully."

"Hands!" said Dimokurov impatiently. "You know I don't mean my hands."

"Well, what of it!" Vatulin said. He said it rather too vigorously as he gave a quick look at Dimokurov's motionless face, half hidden under the curtainlike mask of gauze.

"Don't talk rot," went on Dimokurov. "You know you wouldn't change places with me and I don't blame you. Still, I wish they'd let me have a mirror."

"The doctor said that you don't need a mirror yet," Uncle Petya reminded him cheerfully, but turning his head away. "In two or three weeks time, when the scars have got a bit paler and evened up a bit more you'll be able to have a peep. But honest to God, chum, it isn't so terrible. There are a few scars but they'll all heal."

"No. They'll stay. And you know it."

Uncle Petya shifted his feet and leaned heavily on his crutches.

"There are bound to be some scars, of course," said Vatulin soothingly, "but most of them will heal."

"And meanwhile we're standing here gassing and your visitor is waiting downstairs," Uncle Petya said.

Dimokurov turned over and lay with his face to the wall. Uncle Petya and Vatulin looked at one another.

"Tell you what," said Vatulin, "we'll switch off the light."

"That's an idea," said Uncle Petya. "We'll switch off the light and you can have a chat with her in the dark. It's only for to-night. She'll be gone tomorrow."

Dimokurov turned over slowly and lay on his back frowning. "What about the light from the corridor," he said.

"It doesn't reach your bed. Anyway, let's try it."

Vatulin jerked his crutches forward and swung himself to the door in one long lurch. The switch clicked and the ward was dark.

"Well, how is it?" said Dimokurov after a pause.

"Can't see a thing. Honest."

"Are you sure? Have another look. Maybe your eyes aren't used to the dark yet."

"Not a thing, chum. Now get set. I'm going to tell nurse to bring her up."

Dimokurov sighed and lay back against the pillow. "I don't know . . ." he said. "Oh, all right. Go ahead."

* * *

Walking so quickly that she hardly noticed anything, Shura followed the nurse down a long corridor. Through the open doors of the wards she caught glimpses of long rows of cots and wounded men, most of the latter were in bed, but some were sitting on their cots. From one ward she heard a man's voice groaning softly as she passed. Men in dressing gowns were standing by a window, having a cheerful conversation. From somewhere at the far end of the corridor came the familiar, homelike clatter of dishes.

The nurse stopped outside a door. "Here we are," she said, and went off down the corridor.

Shura paused in the doorway and looked around her but could make out nothing. The ward was quite dark except for the light

that filtered in from the corridor. Then in the darkness there was a cough and a familiar voice said:

"Hullo, Shura. Find yourself a chair. There should be one to your right."

Her heart fluttered. She felt that the darkness hid something too terrible for words. Without thinking what she was saying she asked:

"You're wounded, aren't you?" And, hearing him chuckle, corrected herself quickly: "Badly wounded, I mean."

"My dear, that's pretty obvious, isn't it? Shall we talk about something else?"

She felt for the chair, pushed it to one side and moved along the narrow space between the cots.

"I can't see anything at all," she said. "Why don't you have the light on?"

"Never mind the light. Sit down and tell me how you've been getting on."

She saw something dimly pale in the gloom and realised he was offering her his hand. She took it quickly and tenderly in both of hers. Her fingers, hardly touching the rough gauze, ran lightly over the dressings and found an unbandaged spot. They slid over it and pressed it timidly, warmly, yet ever so lightly.

"Does it hurt?" she whispered, as though she herself were suffering exquisite anguish at that moment.

"No, it doesn't hurt a bit. But do sit down. There's the chair over there."

"But why is it so dark in here? May I turn on the light."

"Better not. You see, we're not allowed to have it on. It's all right. We can talk like this."

Reluctantly, she sat down on the edge of the chair. "Thank goodness I found you," she said. "To think that I nearly went away without knowing you were here. The very thought sends shudders down my back."

"It was rather a miracle your finding me after all these years. How long is it?"

"How long do you make it?"

"Can't remember. It seems ages."

"It's not so long. It's only four years. I even remember the frock I wore that day."

Again she heard him chuckle in the dark.

"Can you?" he said in a drawling voice. "What was it like?"

"Oh, it was just an ordinary sort of frock. Green with a yellow sash. I remember it now because that was the last time I ever put it on. I never wore it again after that."

"Why not?"

"Well, it was a summer frock, you see, and the cold weather set in immediately after, and by the time next summer came round I'd grown out of it. And that's the history of the green frock with the yellow sash," she finished on a defiant note.

"It was a red sash," he said softly.

Shura started. "Red?" she said. "Why yes, so it was."

She laughed and got up from the chair. "May I sit a bit nearer you?" she asked. She stretched out her hand, and although he was about to shrink away from her, she laid her fingers lightly on his head and stroked his hair.

"Please let me turn on the light for a moment," she said. "I'll take one look and turn it off again. Where's the switch? I can't see a thing."

"There isn't a switch," Dimokurov said quickly. Then, more calmly, "For your own sake I wouldn't advise you to."

"Don't be silly. It won't make any difference to me. I promise it won't. I must see what you look like. I swear it won't make any difference."

"Oh yes, it will." He said it with such weary hopeless certainty that for a moment she felt quite numb with pity and horror.

In the darkness she heard him sigh. "Shura," he said "would you mind standing over by the door so that I can have a look at you? It's lighter there."

She got up and walked over to the door, smoothing her hair as she went. She stood leaning her shoulder against the door, with her head slightly on one side.

"Like this?" she said smiling.

He said nothing. She stood there for some time. "Will that

do?" she asked. Still he said nothing. She went over to the cot and gently took his hand.

"Well?" she said.

"You're just the same" he said dreamily. Then, in a polite conversational tone: "I hear you're going away. You've got your ticket?"

"Yes, I got it this morning."

"Is it difficult to get railway tickets nowadays?"

"Why do you ask?" she said with a sudden touch of belligerency. "You're not thinking of going anywhere are you?"

"No. I was merely interested in you, that's all."

"Oh, I see. Yes, it is rather difficult, but I managed. The train leaves at 5.30 tomorrow morning."

She leaned back in her chair and looked around her although she could see little in the gloom.

"Do I smell flowers?" she said.

"Yes. There are some in the room, I believe. People bring them occasionally."

"Friends of yours?"

"No. I haven't got any friends in this town. You know that. Strangers send us flowers now and again."

Shura said quickly and a little breathlessly: "Do you remember that flower?"

"Yes." He said it involuntarily before he had time to think. She gave a nod of satisfaction.

Dimokurov laughed a hard dry laugh. "It isn't really so very difficult to remember one tiny flower," he said. "I should think it would be much harder for you to remember all the flowers you've given away like that in the last four years. They'd probably make a good-sized bouquet." He moved sharply in the bed, then winced with pain and turned his face away.

Shura raised a slim shoulder, put her head on one side and rubbed her cheek against it. It was a familiar gesture of hers.

"A pretty miserable bouquet," she said at last with an effort. "Only two tiny flowers. The one I gave to you and the other not worth mentioning. What's the matter? Does it hurt?"

"What makes you think so?"

"The way you're breathing. Is it your hand?"

"Yes, my hand—amongst other things."

"Does it hurt very much? Surely it oughtn't to hurt any more now? What happened to your hand? I wish you'd tell me."

"There's nothing much wrong with my hands. I'll be able to work all right, although I'm damned if I know what at. Funny isn't it, a grown man of thirty having to start life all over again. I can tell you some of the things I shall never be, though. I shall never be a champion sprinter, or a footballer or a pianist. And I very much doubt whether I'll ever be an artist's model. But I suppose I'll find something to do."

He said all this in a quiet, flat voice. He had thought about it so many times before that he had become quite used to the idea.

A subdued hubbub of voices came from the corridor, the patter of slippered feet and the tap of crutches. The patients were going down to supper. Uncle Petya and Vatulin paused by the door and looked into the dimness of their ward.

"She's still there?" whispered Vatulin anxiously.

Uncle Petya sighed.

"Who's still there?" asked another patient who was carrying his wounded arm in its thick layer of bandages held stiffly out in front of him like an infant in swaddling clothes.

"Shut up," hissed Uncle Petya sharply, nodding towards the door. "Dimokurov's got a visitor, a girl."

"Lucky beggar. Dimokurov? Which is he?"

"Lucky!" echoed Uncle Petya bitterly. "Don't you know Dimokurov?"

The man with the bandaged hand thought for a moment, then he gave a low whistle and stared at Uncle Petya.

"Jesus," he said. "You don't mean the one whose face. . . ."

Just then the nurse came along the corridor. When she got to the door of the darkened ward Vatulin shifted uneasily, coughed and signed to her with his hand. She nodded to him to show that she understood. She put her head round the door of the ward and said it was time for supper and for visitors to leave.

"You'd better be getting along, Shurochka," Dimokurov said, when the nurse had gone. "You'll have to be up early to catch

the train. Five-thirty you said, didn't you? Why are you smiling?"

"Five-thirty, yes. And I'm smiling because you called me Shurochka. If you like I'll go down to the station now and get the money back on my ticket."

"What for?" He tried to say it lightly, mockingly even, but his voice sounded hoarse and flat.

"So that I can stay here."

He cleared his throat violently. "We'll have the nurse after us in a minute," he said in a clear voice. "You'd better be going, Shura."

"All right," she said, "I'll go now." she got up.

"Would you mind very much if I asked you to kiss me?"

The words were barely out of his mouth before she bent over him, so close that he felt the ripple of air made by the quick movement of her body.

"Go now," he said. "Go quickly."

In the doorway she paused for a moment and stood there rubbing her cheek on her shoulder. Then she turned and began to walk slowly along the corridor.

Dimokurov lay staring at the door. He crumpled the edge of the sheet in his wounded hand. "Lyubushka," he said softly—"Dearest"—and wondered why the old fashioned peasant term of endearment which he had not heard since childhood should have come into his head.

"Lyubushka."

Her footsteps stopped in the corridor. She called back to him: "What did you say?"

He didn't answer for a moment. Then in a flat, tired voice he said: "I was only calling the nurse."

She came back and stood in the doorway. "You're fibbing," she said, and before he knew what was happening she stretched out her hand to the switch and turned on the light.

A milky white light flooded the ward. She stood there blinking for a moment. "Don't worry, darling. Don't be angry with me," she said. "It'll be all the same to me. Really it will."

She saw the pink blanket and the other two empty beds with

the sheets turned down. She saw his lips tightly compressed and his head pressed deep into the pillow. And to her surprise she saw his hair, the same thick slightly wavy hair, and the bandaged hand awkwardly raised to hide his tense, quivering scar-slashed face.

She ran over to him and with the tears streaming down her face, dropped on to her knees beside the bed and flung her arms over his legs, pressing herself against them.

"Good God, what have they done to you, darling? And you've had to suffer it all alone. Take your hand away. Don't you believe me when I say it doesn't make any difference? Honestly, it doesn't make a scrap of difference."

She was silent for a moment, choking with pity and pain and the desire to do something for him at once, that very instant.

With his hand still covering his face he pleaded with her in a hoarse, muffled voice: "Please go away, Shura. Please. That's all I want. Please go."

The nurse came in and in a tone of gentle disapproval announced that visiting time was over. Only then did Shura realise that she was kneeling beside the cot, weeping. She scrambled to her feet and staggered blindly from the ward. She could not remember whether she had said goodbye to him or not.

As she walked along the corridor she heard a frenzied tapping of crutches behind her and Uncle Petya caught up with her. At first she did not recognise him. Then she remembered having spoken to him down below when she came in.

Uncle Petya's face was flushed from the effort of catching up with her.

"You're going?" he said, a little out of breath, looking into her face with an anxious smile.

"Yes," she said, staring straight in front of her so that he should not see her swollen, reddened eyes. "It's past time."

"And you won't be coming back any more?"

"Who said so?" she said it absent-mindedly. She didn't understand what he was driving at.

"Perhaps you will, then?" Uncle Petya persisted, keeping up with her on his crutches. "Tomorrow perhaps, eh? You will?"

Annoyed at having to talk to a stranger in her present mood Shura said: "Why do you ask? Are you a friend of his? I'm afraid I can't stop here talking. Good-bye."

"Good-bye," echoed Uncle Petya uncertainly and remained standing at the head of the staircase, watching her walk slowly down to the entrance hall.

In the glass of a large picture of a grape harvest, that hung on the staircase, Shura caught sight of her reflection, and behind it the reflection of Uncle Petya on his crutches looking down at her. She saw another man with fat cheeks, who was also on crutches, come up and ask him something with a worried look.

She walked down a few more steps and her reflection disappeared. At the bottom of the stairs, she furtively wiped her eyes and glanced round.

The two men on the landing had been joined by several more patients all of whom were looking down at her. Some were resting on their crutches, others were leaning against the wide balustrade. Uncle Petya was standing at the edge of the stairs with one hand on the shoulder of his little fat-cheeked friend.

She could not take in the whole scene at once as she turned round. All she could see were those eyes looking at her, smiling eyes, tired eyes, eyes that were tender, questioning, stern and full of suffering; eyes that were good and kind.

It occurred to her then that she had forgotten to say something important.

She turned her tear-stained face towards them and looked up at them with a shame-faced, trusting smile and brushed the tears from her eyes with the back of her hand.

"I'll come again tomorrow," she stammered. "I will really."

Uncle Petya nodded back at her from the landing.

"We knew," he said, and his face lit up with a happy confident mile.

MOTHER STOYAN

By ALEXANDER DOVZHENKO

★

IT IS not to provoke tears or sorrow, it is not to provoke grief or to call down bitter curses on the heads of the Germans, for they are thrice cursed already by the whole of mankind, but to the glory of our people, in honour of the love they bear their country that I narrate here this story of a glorious death.

And although we are destined to lose yet many who are near and dear to us, although it would be far pleasanter, after the toil and thunder of the battlefield, to relax for an hour or so with something light and gay, let us, nevertheless, devote a spare half hour to Old Mother Stoyan.

* * *

Who is that running down the burning village street, threading his way among the enemy dead?

Who is that, whose short, laboured breath sounds like a moan, whose heart pounds as if it were fit to leap from his breast?

Who is that, armed with a tommy gun and hand grenades?

It is Vasily Stoyan—Old Mother Stoyan's boy.

And whose body is it hanging under the open sky near the charred remains of the kitchen stove?

It is Old Mother Stoyan's body—the body of Vasily Stoyan's mother.

Vasily pressed on, covered with perspiration from the heat of the long-drawn-out battle. On he ran, anxious and alarmed. How he had fought for his native village! It was he who had acted as guide to the unit. It was his hand grenade that had demolished the strong point which had once been his uncle's house. The enemy had turned and fled with our men hard on his heels.

Vasily ran the whole length of the village, or of what had once been the village. The houses were still in flames, the orchard but

charred remains; shell-holes and craters pitted the ground, and everywhere, weltering in their own blood, lay the enemy dead.

"Mum, where are you? It's me, Vasily! I told you I'd come back again! Poor Ivan was killed, Mum, but I'm alive and kicking. . . . I made them pay for Ivan, Mum . . . wiped out a couple of hundred of them. . . . But where are you?"

Vasily turned towards the front garden of the house which had once nestled at the foot of the hill.

"Mum, mother! Where are you? Why don't you come out to meet me, dear? Why can't I hear your sweet voice? Where are you, darling? Dear old Mum, where are you?"

Vasily stopped short. Where his cottage had once been there was no cottage. He turned towards the yard, but there was no yard; to the orchard—but there was no orchard. Only one gnarled pear tree had survived, and hanging from it was the body of his old mother.

"Alas! . . . Ah me, that I should have lived to see this bitter hour! . . ."

* * *

One stormy winter night, when Old Mother Stoyan had still been alive and the cottage had still been where it had stood for years, there had come a knock at the door. The time was long after curfew.

"Who's there?"

"Let us in, please. We're freezing."

"But who are you? Where do you come from? What nationality are you? '

"We're Russians. Friends. Airmen—that's who we are. Our plane crashed."

"Good gracious! Come in, quick! I'll bolt the door after you . . . Let's hope nobody saw you! There are Germans all over the village."

Two lads staggered into the room—both of them crippled.

Hardly had they crossed the threshold than they sank on to the floor and fell fast asleep, plunging, as it were, into some deep abyss. They slept the clock round. It seemed to Mother Stoyan that they would never wake up.

She bathed their feet with hot water and then built up a fire in the oven. Three times she warmed up a meal for them on the off chance that they would wake up, but still they slept on. Scalding tears trickled down her cheeks as she looked at them, recalling her two sons—Ivan and Vasily. Who would give her boys a bite to eat, who would give them shelter or do them an act of kindness in these times of dire trouble? Where were they now? Perhaps they were already lying stark and stiff in some snow-covered field with the bleak wind ruffling their unruly hair? Perhaps they were already hanging on the gallows somewhere in German-occupied territory, with the ravens pecking their eyes out in the frost? And there would be nobody to cast a pitying glance at them, or ask who they were, or shed a tear over them! . . . What would you, when death stalks at large through the land! My children, oh, my children! . . .

Stepan Pshenitsyn and Kostya Ryabov both hailed from the Urals. They belonged to that breed of Russian youth which for long years to come will be the subject of deep study and arouse the profound wonderment of the historians of the great human drama of our times. They were plain, ordinary Ural lads with an average schooling, honest and hard-working. Both of them were members of the Young Communist League, both of them came from good working-class stock, both of them had volunteered for the front so as to come to grips with the enemy as quickly as possible and wipe him out.

Both of them had soon qualified as pilots, although they might have just as easily and simply have become submarine men or snipers. Nature had endowed them generously with her gifts, and there was good stuff in them that only needed bringing out.

"At first we let the Fritzes have it for quite a while with good heavy bombs, Mother, but later on we were switched over to cultural and educational work. We weren't very keen on the change, but we had to do as we were told—orders you know."

"And what kind of work might that be?" asked Old Mother Stoyan as they were chatting one evening in the darkened cottage.

"We used to drop leaflets over the Ukraine, Mother," Pshenitsyn explained, "so as to let folks know the truth about the war."

"Oh, my boys, what noble work you were doing!" Mother Stoyan exclaimed. "Yes, really noble work—to give us a bit of good news in this hell of ours. Nobody round about had the slightest idea what was going on. The Germans kept trying to stuff our heads with their trash. It was all so sickening that at times there seemed to be no sense in going on living, that everything was over. Just think. . . . So it was you? . . ."

And only then, stranded in that devastated land and listening to the simple words of Mother Stoyan, did Ryabov and Pshenitsyn, for the first time, really understand the great mission that had been given them. Here, in this old cottage that had seen better days, sitting in the dark behind closed shutters, to the accompaniment of a raging blizzard outside and the ominous rumble of the front, they learned how people had copied out their leaflets by hand, committed them to memory, word for word, and spread the tidings from village to village in order to fan the flames of hope in the people's hearts. And these words of truth had gleamed like beacons in the surrounding darkness. They had saved many thousands of people, who had begun to lose heart at finding themselves entangled in a web of lies, from actions as desperate as they were dreadful to contemplate.

For a long time Pshenitsyn and Ryabov sat lost in thought. And then they told Mother Stoyan how their plane had been hit and had crashed in the woods one night, how they had escaped with their lives, but with broken arms and ribs and heads, how they had crawled and stumbled ever eastward through dense forests and dark gullies, how they had hidden from the Germans in pits, snowdrifts and deep ravines. And, narrating their adventures, they marvelled themselves at the indomitable strength of their will to live.

"Where did this happen?" asked Mother Stoyan, throwing up her hands in distress.

"A long way off. Yes, miles from here."

"Long ago?"

"Yes, over a month ago. Our bones have already had time to set where they were fractured, you see."

They showed Mother Stoyan the terrible scars of the wounds that had maimed them.

"Gracious me!" she exclaimed horror-stricken.

"Don't take it to heart so, Mother," they said, comforting her as best they could. "They'll heal in time, don't you worry. We're the kind of chaps who can stand anything. All we need is to rest awhile and get our strength back. After that we'll make our way across the front, even if we have to crawl under the snow to do it."

"Nothing can daunt you, I see! My own boys are just the same. . . ."

For two weeks the cottage served the lads as a snug hiding-place. Mother Stoyan looked after them, fed them and acted as a guardian angel over them. When all her supplies gave out she went from house to house asking for alms. Nobody refused her, nobody asked any questions, although all of them must have guessed why she was doing it: it was not in Mother Stoyan's nature to ask alms for herself.

But Mother Stoyan was not destined to keep the lads secure from danger. One morning the villagers were suddenly awakened by the thunder of terrific gunfire. The front was drawing nearer. Units new to the local inhabitants filed wearily into the village, looking rather badly battered about. Mother Stoyan, who had been out all the morning, suddenly came hobbling into the room.

"Look out boys! They're coming!"

But the Germans followed closely on her heels.

"Who are these men?" asked the officer in charge.

"They're my sons."

"You're lying!"

"I swear to you, I'm not!"

"Search them!"

"Leave them alone! They're sick, they're cripples. . . . Good God!"

"Hands up! So she's your mother, is she?"

"Yes," Ryabov confirmed.

"That's a lie, my commissar friend!" the officer exclaimed, levelling his revolver.

Old Mother Stoyan threw herself in front of the lads, shielding them with her body.

"For God's sake, don't. Kill me if you want to . . . but leave them alone, you brutes! . . . Please, please! Haven't you a mother, too, or did a werewolf give birth to you? They're my sons, I tell you! . . ."

"Why did you hide them?"

"I was afraid. The likes of you are enough to frighten anyone! There's nothing on earth more fearful than you!"

"Ha-ha-ha! That's true! You're right for once, old woman. There's nothing more fearful than us, and there can't be. Ha-ha-ha!" guffawed the German skunk, mightily pleased with the remark.

Two hours later the Germans drove the inhabitants who had remained behind to the village square, in order to confront them with the two pilots.

Pshenitsyn and Ryabov stood in the centre of the square. All around them were strange faces.

"Good-bye, chum" . . . whispered Pshenitsyn, glancing at his friend.

"Good-bye. . . ."

"Kind folks . . . can't you see . . . it's Ivan and Vasily! Don't you really recognise them?" appealed Mother Stoyan to her fellow villagers in desperation.

"Why don't you speak up and say that they're my boys? What are you silent for? Have pity! Isn't there a spark of pity in you? villagers . . . fellow villagers! . . ."

Tears stood in the eys of some, others wept openly; and heedless of the danger that threatened them, they attested, one after the other, that the lads were Mother Stoyan's boys. Only Palashka, the widow of the late chief constable who had been killed by the guerillas, maintained a sinister silence.

"Palashka . . . vouch for them . . . attest that they're my sons! If you don't I'll call down curses on your head both in this world and the next," Mother Stoyan hissed. "Remember, God will call you to account, Palashka. . . ."

Still Palashka did not say anything.

"Frau Palashka, are they her sons?" the German Commandant asked.

All eyes were fixed on Palashka. With bated breath the people waited to hear what she would say. An awful silence hung over the square.

The Commandant's face grew livid. His thick neck swelled out like a cobra's. He began to suspect that the villagers were in league with the old woman.

"Well?"

"They're her sons!' Palashka confirmed, lowering her eyes.

The Commandant landed her a terrible blow on the right jaw followed by another on the left. Palashka dropped like a log, without so much as a cry. Turning to the pilots, he asked them unexpectedly:

"Your names?"

"Oh, my God!" the words seemed to be wrung from Mother Stoyan's heart. She had not told them her surname and they, out of sheer thoughtlessness too, had not asked her.

A stunning blow at the back of her head sent her spinning to the ground. Slowly she scrambled to her feet. As though in a dream she heard Pshenitsyn and Ryabov calling to her:

"Good-bye, Mother! You're a brick! With a mother like you we're not afraid to die! . . ."

A volley rang out. . . .

They lay in the snow, linked together in a last embrace. The Germans took her under the arms and half carried, half dragged her back to the cottage, beating her on the way with whatever weapons they happened to lay hands on. A couple of hand grenades reduced the cottage into a heap of smoking ruins. Then they pushed her under a near-by pear tree. The pear tree seemed to swim in front of her eyes.

"Don't hang me! Don't put me to such a shame! You can't leave me swinging in the air! I'm an old woman! Don't grudge me a bullet, just one bullet, I implore you!"

Her entreaties were of no avail. Scrambling on to a tree stump she quickly made the sign of the cross.

"Don't you dare touch me, you monsters! Keep your paws away from my neck! . . ."

She slipped the noose on herself.

"My boys! . . ." and she stepped into space.

* * *

For a long time Vasily lay in the snow under the pear tree. Nobody heard the convulsive sobbing that racked his frame, the lamentations of his tormented heart, the grating of his teeth as he swore to exact retribution. But with the first sign of dawn, when the iron had entered into his soul and the ominous rumbling of the guns had ushered in a new day, Vasily grew more composed and lay there as though asleep from sheer exhaustion. After a while he rose to his feet and, pressing his lips to his mother's cold hand, whispered falteringly:

"Good-bye, Mother. . . . Every spark of tenderness you ever bequeathed me I leave here, Mother . . . with you . . . beneath this tree. . . ."

Going over to the ruins of what had once been his home he scraped up a handful of ashes and wrapped them up in his handkerchief.

"I'll take these with me, Mum, so that my feet shall never tire, my hands never falter and my heart never flinch."

A column of fighting men stood lined up on the roadside, ready to proceed on their way to the West.

"Private Stoyan!"

"Coming, right away!"

"Who is that woman?"

"My mother."

"Your mother?"

"Yes, Comrade Commander, the dearest mother a man ever had. . . ."

"Company, 'shun! . . . Present arms!"

. . . They buried her with military honours. The youth of the country, in paying homage to Mother Stoyan before going once more into action, paid homage, as it were, to the mothers that bore them. The sun tinged the snow a deep crimson hue. The

salvoes of heavy guns rent the air and the sparkling snowflakes, shaken from the boughs of the pear tree, floated down on to the fresh mound beneath it.

* * *

The supreme sacrifice of Old Mother Stoyan will shine through the ages as the noble act of a mother who begged alms for children not her own. We can picture her in our mind's eye hanging from the pear tree, suspended above her native, ice-bound soil. Her hands so small and tender, with their slender and beautiful fingers—those very same hands so accustomed to toil and which were for ever busy baking, spinning, sowing—are stretched towards us with the palms upturned, as though to say:

"I've nothing left, children, nothing. I've given my all, my blessing upon you!"

Her small body seems to soar up through the cold winter sky, and the aged head, inclined slightly to one side, touches the clouds heralding the spring.

Immortal glory to your memory, Mother Stoyan!

You never travelled far or wide, you had no time to spare. Like a bee you were busy from dawn till dusk, storing honey in our Soviet hives, until those monsters in human shape deprived you of your life.

But from far and wide people will make pilgrimage to you, Our Lady Divine. They will come to see the ruined stove under the bare sky, the bunch of dried cloves you kept in the niche as a charm against the evil eye, the memorial that will be set up to you. And the whole world will revere your beauty, you, our Mother, our glorious Slav-Ukrainian Mother!

Whether you were a Communist or not we do not know. In all probability you were not. But one thing is certain—the seed sown by our Lenin found fertile soil in your heart.

Then let the whole world know, Mother, why the Germans hanged you from the old pear tree and how, during the Great Patriotic War, in a tiny village in blood-drenched Ukraine, you conquered death for the sake of your fellow-countrymen.

THE OLD WOMAN

By BORIS LAVRENEV

★

WHEN THE nine friends, nine members of a Wireless Signalling squad in a unit of marines, reached the village of Sharonovo, it became obvious that there was no village at the place indicated. The village now existed solely as a mark on the map at headquarters. Where it had been was nothing but smashed and splintered wood, deep craters filled with coffee-coloured marsh water, heaps of bricks, remnants of smashed stoves, and bitter, dry ashes, which the wind swirled about and drove into their eyes.

Artillery as well as aeroplanes had done their worst to the village and the torchbearers of German civilisation had finished the job. Before they fled they had burned down whatever had not already been knocked down.

This made it all the more strange and striking to discover, in the very centre of all this ruin and devastation, one single intact cottage. New, solidly built of good strong timber not yet browned by rain or weather, it had been damaged neither by bombardment or by fire.

As the marines shouldered their way from under charred brushwood into the open, they stared astonished at the cottage standing amidst the surrounding litter like a monument to the village that once had been. They were even more astounded when they saw a woman busy on the exterior of the cottage. She was engaged on a domestic task, fixing bits of glass, picked up from among the rubble, into one of the window frames, and glueing them together with long strips of old newspapers. The presence of a living soul in this dreadful place was just as unaccountable as the existence of a still standing house.

When the marines approached, they saw a miserable old

woman, incredibly thin. From under the cloth kerchief on her head wisps of grey hair straggled over her wrinkled hollow cheeks. Her deep-sunk eyes stared dully and indifferently. The torn and dirty rags dangling from her shoulders revealed the shrivelled yellow of her body. The coming of the nine marines made no visible impression on her. She barely glanced in their direction and then turned back to what she was doing.

Vinogradov, the sergeant in charge of the signalling squad, irrepressible jester of the regiment, doffed his sailor's cap, and with a graceful flourish and bow like one of the famous Musketeers, clicked his heels and said briefly:

"Greetings from the Red Navy, granny! We have orders to drop anchor at this port. Yours seems to be the only palace left and the population too seems to be reduced to one. So let's introduce ourselves. We're an heroic marine detachment, obliged by the fortune of war to forsake our beloved battleship *Marat* and become landlubbers. Will you take us in as lodgers?"

The old woman stared and moved her lips, disclosing the fact that her mouth was toothless. She mumbled:

"If you're going to stay, stay. It's nothing to do with me. The house is empty. There's plenty of room. You go your way, I'll go mine."

Vinogradov scratched the back of his head.

"Well, granny, it's strange for you to be so indifferent to your own people. 'You go your way, I'll go mine!' Here we are, nine unfortunate water-orphans, who have lost their fathers and mothers in the storm and stress of war. The married ones are separated from their wives, too. Won't you take pity on us?"

Two of the marines laughed, but the old woman went on staring in the same dull, lifeless way. Then she sighed, with what sounded like a grunt and effort in her chest. And she muttered again:

"You do as you like. If you want me to do anything I'll do it."

Stumbling, her skinny legs under the torn skirt barely supporting her, the old woman climbed slowly up the steps and disappeared into the cottage.

"Cheerful old girl," Vinogradov said regretfully. "The spit

and image of my favourite film-star. We're in for a high old time here, boys. Well, there's nothing to be done about it. Let's get settled in and start on the job."

The marines were busy all night fixing up their wireless transmitter and testing the contacts. And all night through they heard the old woman coughing and occasionally moaning in the little room to the right of the passage.

"The poor creature seems to have suffered a lot," Peregudov, a pock-marked marine from Siberia, presently remarked with a frown: "How long were the Germans here? Seven months? Long enough to dry up a tree, I reckon, let alone an old woman."

"She looks as if she might die," said Kostya Malinin in agreement. "We ought to try to get some food inside her. She's sure to be some young fellow's mother. Maybe her son is helping the mother of one of us somewhere at the other end of the front."

"Yes, that's right," joined in Sergeant Vinogradov. "If we can get granny to feed, we'll see her dancing with us before we're finished. Let's consider ourselves her adopted sons, boys, from now on."

Next morning the nine marines, each of whom had an old Russian mother somewhere behind that long line of front, set about looking after the old woman. They repaired the house, dragged firewood from the forest, mended the fence, cleaned out the well, filled in the cracks in the stove and lit it. Then they poured tinned pork-and-peas soup into a pailful of boiling water, and chocolate cubes into a boiling teapot, and forced the old woman to sit down to dinner with them in spite of all her refusals. The old woman yielded to the combined marine attack as they poured out soup and chocolate for her, spread her bread with dripping, and untiringly looked after her every need. By the end of the meal a warmer look had crept into her sullen eyes. She carefully wiped the spoon on the edge of her kerchief, got up, and folding her hands over the hollow body, made a deep bow to the marines:

"Thank you, kind people."

The nine men saw tears rolling down the old woman's wrinkles.

They felt shaken and moved. Vinogradov said in some embarrassment:

"You mustn't thank us, granny, and you mustn't cry. I'll tell you straight out we're doing this for our own sakes. There's our washing to be done, and mending and darning. If we can get into your good graces, it'll be a piece of good luck for us. What do you say, shall we organise our existence here on a basis of fraternal mutual exploitation?"

The old woman looked at Vinogradov and for the first time smiled faintly:

"You're a jolly one," she muttered.

"You bet," answered Vinogradov promptly. "Life's too hard to be mournful, granny."

Very soon the marines became as accustomed to the old woman as if they had grown up in that cottage. And the old woman for her part seemed gradually to come back to life. But although she seemed to like talking to the marines, she would shrivel up and go rigid the moment anyone even mentioned or put a question about what she must have gone through during the German occupation. So Sergeant Vinogradov said to the squad:

"I notice that some of you put tactless questions to mother. It's obvious she doesn't like it. Why should we ask her such questions? Who are we, anyway, wireless operators, or war correspondents? So, no more worrying her. I put it to the vote: Who's for it, nobody can be against it."

From that time on, the subject was scrupulously avoided. The old woman grew loving and attentive. She washed their underwear, mended, darned, cooked—did everything that a housewife could. The marines were made as snug and as comfortable as they could have been at home. And they for their part grew fond of the old woman. They shared their thoughts with her, read her their letters from home, confided their secrets to her, and asked her advice in the most intimate matters.

After dinner one day, when the dishes had been cleared away and the old woman had gone out to potter about the potato patch, Peregudov glanced after her and shook his head:

"Look here, boys, it's time we began looking after our mother

a bit better. We've all seen what a mess her clothes are. We're not going to be here for ever and if we go off and leave her to face the winter frost like this we shall all be responsible for her death of cold. We must fit her out. Let's look through our kit. There are things we can spare."

"Do you want to rig her up in sailor's trousers," laughed Malinin.

"Don't talk rubbish!" Peregudov snapped. "Why should it have to be trousers. Luzgin here worked in a garment factory. He could make some woman's clothes for her."

The proposal was approved. The marines went through their sacks and collected two pairs of old trousers, a sailor's jacket and three jerseys. Vinogradov added a reefer overcoat that was a bit worn but still in fair condition. It was decided that the presents should be a surprise for the old woman so he worked in the attic with a notice on the door: 'Secret: No admission.' Vanya Kleimyarov, a short and scrawny electrical engineer, was used as a mannequin. The job took Luzgin a week. Kleimyarov looked quite smart in a navy blue skirt and a jacket to match, with turn-down collar. But when he put on the tailored overcoat, cut down out of Vonogradov's reefer turned inside out and the second pair of trousers, then everyone took his cap off to Luzgin. The three jerseys Luzgin turned into two striped blouses with insertions made out of brightly coloured handkerchiefs that Peregudov had bought in Riga before the war. The trousseau was formally presented to the old woman, Sergeant Vinogradov accompanying the occasion with a speech:

"Our most respected adopted mother—given us by the war, if we may say so—please accept our gift. Change into these clothes and wear them for our sakes. Throw your rags away or, better still, lay them aside and keep them till we can dress Hitler in them and lead him on a string."

The old woman took the neatly folded clothes from Vinogradov with trembling hands. She tried to say something, but only a sob came, and she darted into her tiny room.

"Never mind," said Vinogradov, "Let her have a good cry."

When the old woman had changed her clothes and come out,

her manner seemed to the marines to have changed too. Her bent back had straightened, here eyes were brighter and there was something vaguely youthful even about her toothless mouth.

From that day on she became even more active and busy in caring for the needs of the marines.

One day Vinogradov was giving himself a good wash in a room off the passage that the marines had turned into a bath-house by the simple process of putting there a tub that they had found in the ruins of a cottage. The sergeant stood in the tub which he had filled with hot water, and scrubbed himself hard with a wisp of bass. But try as he would he could not reach properly between his shoulder-blades. He suddenly noticed through the half-open door the old woman on her way back to the yard.

"Hi, there, granny!" Vinogradov called out, "Do come here and be a friend. Scrub my back, I just can't get at it."

The old woman stopped at the door, but did not answer immediately.

After some hesitation she said:

"You know, I'm a woman, and here you are. . . ."

"Now, come on!" broke in the sergeant with a laugh. "Don't be so funny! You aren't much of a woman, at your age. I bet compared to you I'm a babe-in-arms. . . ."

"All right," said the old woman, opening wide the doors and rolling up her sleeves. "I'll fix you up, since you're so helpless. . ."

She snatched up a piece of soapy bast, and began rubbing the sergeant's back hard. She rubbed it until it was flaming red, while the warmth filled Vinogradov with a pleasant sensation. Then she disappeared swiftly before he could thank her.

"How queer it is," ruminated the sergeant. "So old and so shy. Ah well, I suppose a woman's a woman till she lies in her grave!" Then he scrambled out of the tub.

The nine marines lived on in this way until the order came for them to move elsewhere. When the old woman heard that they were going, she relapsed into her former glum misery.

Vinogradov tried to cheer her up:

"But, granny, we're not parting for ever. We're never going to forget you and all your love and kindness. When the war is

over, we'll come back for you, and you shall live with whichever one of us you like, or take turns with each of us, if you prefer, so as not to make any favourites."

But the old woman showed no sign of being comforted. She sat on the porch leaning her head on her shrivelled arms and staring dully at the green forest beyond the open space.

That evening the marines packed their wireless apparatus on a cart and got ready to go. Vinogradov walked over to the old woman.

"We hope to see you soon, granny dear. We thank you with all our hearts. Look forward to our coming back. We know you're pretty old but we do hope to see you again."

He embraced the old woman, and suddenly she threw both arms round his neck, pressed her limp cheek against his and burst into heart-rending sobs. Through her tears the marines caught some choking, pitiful words:

"I can't bear you going. When you nine boys came here it was as though life had begun again. Now it's like going back into the darkness of the grave!"

"Don't talk such nonsense, granny dear," said Vinogradov, patting the old woman's back. "Why speak of the grave. You've at least thirty years to go before you reach a hundred."

"Oh God, oh God!" cried the old woman, and her arms dropped from around the sergeant's neck. She covered her face with her hands. "My God, what are you saying? Do you know how old I am? Here you are—you've been calling me granny and mother all these weeks, and I'm only thirty-three. That's what the Germans have done to me!"

As if terrified by her confession, she tore herself from Vinogradov's arms, rushed into the cottage, and slammed the door after her.

The marines stood staggered, silent, avoiding each other's eyes. Their faces darkened and the muscles of their cheeks twitched. Vinogradov lifted his hand slowly and took off his sailor's cap. The eight friends imitated his movement without a word. They stared blankly at the closed door of the cottage, as one stares at the grave of someone one loves

Then Vinogradov spoke slowly and thickly as though speech were difficult. He spoke for all of them:

"Forgive us, sister!"

He pulled his sailor's cap down over his eyes and no longer could he be recognised as the laughing, cheerful sergeant. His lips had gone white, and he went on slowly, as though for all of them he was swearing a solemn oath:

"We've got a big job on hand, boys. And we shan't be through until every fascist bitch has turned grey and died howling over the graves of the scum she gave birth to . . . Right about turn, quick march."

And the nine men crossed the open space, their heads bent, not looking back for fear they might see the woman they were leaving behind them in the cottage come out and stand upon the threshold.

THE NIGHT BEFORE THE BATTLE

By ALEXANDER DOVZHENKO

★

"COMRADE Commander, to-morrow you're leading us ove the top. Now we here, all of us—both the veterans who've beer in it for a long time already, and the youngsters, like Ovcharenk here, who are going into their first battle—know that there'll b hot fighting to-morrow and that some of us will never come back That's right, isn't it?"

Ivan Drobot, a young tankman with an extremely pleasant an modest face, was obviously excited.

"Right," answered their famed commander, Peter Kolodub Hero of the Soviet Union. "Go on, Drobot, what did you wan to say?"

"I wanted to ask you, even though they write about you in al the papers and talk about you at meetings as a man who is fearles and tireless, especially as, you'll pardon me for saying, you don' look too strong and are certainly not a giant, I wanted to ask yo what is the source of all these things they say about you—and w ourselves know for a fact that you'd come out of hell itself wit colours flying; you see, we want you to tell us what you're like to tell us just unofficially, as if there wasn't a war at all. What i your fighting, or rather, so to say, inner, secret? Maybe I haven' expressed myself very clearly—please excuse me."

Drobot reddened after his long and confused question. I seemed to him that he had expressed himself most unclearly, an this upset him completely.

"No, it's quite clear, Drobot. You put it very well, and ex pressed yourself most delicately. I'll be only too glad to answe you, especially since I do really have a secret."

Everyone, and there were about thirty officers and men i the dug-out, drew round him and settled down for a long and inter

esting talk. Their commander knew how to tell a story. They were a splendid lot of men, and Kolodub had become very much attached to them. Putting down his pipe, he waited a moment until there was complete silence.

"It was on the Desna River," he began, smiling at his memories. "Yes. . . . To put it in a nutshell, an ordinary Ukrainian fisherman, a simple old man in no way different from thousands of others in our Ukraine, turned my whole soul inside out."

"Who among us who came through the whole brunt of last year's German invasion will ever forget that old man? Remember last autumn? Every river was the scene of a regular drama, and the ferrymen were like good river spirits. They were brave, these old men, stern and fearless of death. But they seemed to have some sort of a grudge against us crowding there at the crossings. Sometimes their dislike for us . . . well, there just seemed to be no end to it. Isn't that so?"

"That's a fact," sighed someone in the dug-out.

"Anyway, here's the story."

Captain Kolodub shifted his position so that he was sitting cross-legged—a favourite pose of his ever since the days when he had been a shepherd lad—and, putting his hands on his knees, he looked straight in front of him at his men.

The air in the dug-out was thick with smoke. The men sat in the dim light in every possible position, leaning against one another. They were all different, yet all of one family. All of them were united by the unforgettable and inimitable feeling that in time of war brings your hearts closer together in the face of daily danger, a feeling that remains the finest memory throughout the rest of your life.

The years will roll by, wounds will heal, enemy graves will be ploughed under, razed cities and villages will be rebuilt, and much of what happened will become confused in the grey heads, will become tales told and retold, but one thing will remain fixed for all time and never to be forgotten—the lofty and noble feeling of comradeship and brotherhood among the men who fought the German madness and wiped it from the face of the earth.

"We were withdrawing, out of touch with one another, without artillery, retreating to the Eastward day and night. At any moment the enemy pincers might close on us. We carried the wounded on our backs, fell with them, damned everything under the sun, and kept going farther. To tell the truth, there were even some among us who shot themselves in desperation and pride. There were some who threw down their arms and with bitter curses crawled to their cottages, without heart to pass them by."

Kolodub fell silent, lost in thought. Then he continued:

"There were only a few of us—fifteen all told, a few tankmen whose machines had been crippled, machine-gunners, political officers, two ground mechanics, a wireless operator, and even a colonel. At that time I was commander of a tank that had remained with the Germans, its motor wrecked. Before the war I had been a gardener who liked to sing songs and was fond of the girls, that's about all I guess. . . ."

Captain Kolodub laughed so infectiously here, and at the same time with such irony, that everyone in the dug-out laughed with him.

"We were completely played out. Our legs refused to carry us any farther, and it was getting dark. Ahead of us, beyond the village, was a big river. Some of us could not swim. And the Germans were not far off. Someone pointed out the house of the ferryman.

" 'Running are you, you sons-of-bitches?' asked Old Man Platon Pivtorak as he came out of the shed with an oar, a net and a wooden bucket. 'I've sure ferried plenty of you across already. Plenty—and all of you strong, healthy, young, and all of you moaning: *Ferry us across, oh, ferry us across.* . . . Savka!' he shouted over to the neighbouring cottage. 'Come on, Savka. We've got to take 'em across—seems they're still running. Ha! Come on, hurry up. It's the last of 'em, I hope.'

"Savka came out of his house and stared at us with pretended surprise. He must have been seventy, if he was a day. He was short and had a clipped beard. He looked an awful lot like the *ikon* of St. Nicholas, if you can imagine St. Nicholas with a filthy

cap pulled over his ears and a pretty well earth-coloured sweater that hung on him like a father's jacket hangs on a kid.

"After Old Man Savka, a sturdy looking youngster came out with a pair of oars.

" 'Eh-e-e! Look here, my boys, something cockeyed somewhere,' said Old Man Savka regarding us slyly. 'Your uniforms are new, and look at your shiny leather cases and your belts. Ekh, and you're young yourselves. . . . Maybe you're not heading in the right direction, eh?'

" 'Come on, now. Quit it,' said Platon.

"We started out.

" 'Don't fret, there's a rowboat all right, and a good one at that,' I whispered to Boris Troyanda, who was always in more of a flurry than any of the others. He could not swim.

" 'Do you think they'll take us across? I think we've got to keep our eyes skinned,' said Troyanda, trying to keep a check on his uneasiness.

" 'I can't make it out. What're they running for like that?' said Old Man Platon to Savka as they walked down to the river, for all the world as if we weren't there at all.

" 'Why're they so scared of dying? Once there's a war on, you don't have to be afraid of death. If you're fated to die, there's no getting away from it anywhere.'

" 'Uh-huh!' agreed Savka. 'As the saying goes: there's no hiding from it in a pond and no ducking out of sight behind the oven.'

" 'They're not in it heart and soul, the spoiled brats,' said Platon angrily. ' Now take my Levko. Look at how he gave it to those what-do-you-call'ems at Khalkin-Gol! Wiped 'em out to a man! Did you read his letter? He's Colonel Levko Pivtorak now, I understand! But this trash, they're not even men.'

"We walked in silence along the narrow path through the dense willow grove. The old fishermen walked ahead with their nets and oars, deliberately, as if they were setting out on one of their regular fishing trips, apparently completely oblivious to the artillery fire and the roar of enemy aircraft—in a word, all those German fireworks that had tortured us so during all the last days of painful retreat simply did not exist for them.

" 'Look here, grand-dad, couldn't you walk a little faster?' Troyanda asked Platon.

"Platon made no reply.

"Restraining himself, Troyanda repeated his question in Ukrainian.

" 'No, I can't,' replied Platon. 'Why the devil are the lot of you in such a tearing hurry all of a sudden? I'm too old to be walking fast. I've done all my fast walking.'

" 'I say, where is the river? Is it far?'

" 'Here it is.'

"And indeed the willow grove came to an abrupt end and we walked out onto the clean sandy shore. Before us lay the broad, quiet Desna. On the opposite shore was a steep bank, and further to the right again sand and a willow grove. Beyond that was a dark forest, while over the river and back of the woods loomed an evening sky the like of which I had never seen before in all my life.

The sun had set some time ago. But its rays still rose over the horizon, lighting up the huge masses of cloud moving from the West over the entire sky. The clouds were heavy and sombre, altogether inky below, while the very tops, the crowns so to say, almost directly over our heads, seemed to have been dipped in violent blood-red and yellow paint.

"Grandiose, silent streaks of lightning flashed almost incessantly among the huge clouds. And all this was reflected in the water, so that it seemed as though we were not standing on the earth, and as though there were no river, but only some sort of gloomy space between the clouds where we hovered, lost in its enormity like grains of sand.

"The sky was out of the ordinary. It seemed as though nature had entered into a compact with events and was warning us with menacing signs. The fish feared such a night, and surged into the shallows at the shores. Somewhere above us, just under the clouds, German rockets were flaring aloft, writhing like snakes. It was light. The livid gleam of the sinister cloud-tops shed a glow. Guns were thundering in the distance. We stood motionless. There was something solemn and oppressive all about us.

We fell silent and stood there in bewilderment, as if we were on the brink of some momentous event.

" 'Well, pile in. We'll take you across. What're you standing there for?' asked Platon. He was already near the boat with his oar.

" 'We'll take you across all right, and there you'll have to shift for yourselves. You couldn't take care of yourselves so I guess we'll see about getting you over. Running . . . well, run, devil take your souls. . . . Where do you think you're going? Didn't you ever see a boat before, soldier?' thundered the old man at one of us. We got into the boat in silence, each of us plunged in his own gloomy thoughts.

" 'Are you ready, Savka?'

" 'Go ahead.'

" 'Look at how the clouds've gathered. Akh! What's it all about? Like the Day of Judgment, eh?'

"Old Man Platon stared at the sky and spat on the palms of his hands. Then he took up his oar, and with a mighty push shoved off from the shore. Savka and his grandson took the oars at the side. The boat was old and roomy, all over tar and warped with age.

"I sat beside Platon, gazing at the quiet river and at the shore, at the lowering clouds overhead on the background of the grim sky. I felt as though I were being ferried across to the other world. Shame and despair, an inexpressible sorrow and many other feelings filled and twisted my heart. Farewell, my beautiful Desna!

"Platon's voice roused me from my reveries. He was continuing his conversation with Savka, a conversation that was insulting and bitter for us to hear. Apparently something was bothering him, something that he wanted to think out to the end. It was as if he were thinking aloud:

" 'God only knows what it's all about. This morning a fellow comes into my house armed to the teeth, with straps on him, and, let me tell you, not any kind of straps, brand new ones.'

" 'Uh-huh!' came Savka's voice from behind me.

" 'And all that cost a pretty penny.'

" 'Uh-huh!'

" '*Get up*,' says he, '*and take me across. You've slept long enough now.*' Three nights I've not slept a wink, but I ferried him over.'

" 'Yes, not long ago, just before it got dark, Mitrofan and I took a party across. One of them, devil take him, wore glasses, like that one sitting beside you. Rigged up in shiny new straps, too, he was; and waving his revolver about besides, and shouting: '*Take me across*,' he says, '*and make it snappy*.' That's God's honest truth. And as for himself he was shaking all over and his eyes popping out like a fish's, he was that scared. There's a pretty picture for you, may God have mercy on it all.

" 'The devil only knows what to make of it.'

" 'Yes. Then his comrades butted in. '*What're you insulting the old man for?*' they said. They all but knocked the stuffing out of him. And then everything was quiet. Like now. You just think of it. . . .' Platon broke off and listened to the guns. 'Listen to that! I guess the Germans'll be showing up pretty soon.'

"The German heavy guns were thundering. Frightened wild ducks flew by overhead.

" '*Take us across, Old Man*'. . . . mimicked Platon angrily.

" 'Uh-huh!' Savka broke in. 'And they don't know that in war if you're fated to die then there's no squirming out of it, and no boat will save you. If a bullet won't get you then a louse will, and war will have its own. . . . Over to the left! There's a strong current here.'

" 'I am bearing to the left. If my Levko were here with his regiment he would never be retreating, not he. He would turn the boat back and pitch into them, he would!' said Platon pulling at his oar furiously. 'He wouldn't be running!'

" 'Uh-huh! My Demid's like that too. You could burn him with fire or cut him to shreds, but he wouldn't retreat. Not like these here!' said Savka. 'All they think of is saving their skins, and you mark my words the result will be that we'll be spitting blood for a long time to come. After all, we'll have to take it all back again!'

" 'Yes, we'll have to,' caught up Platon. 'Can't even begin to

think how much land we'll have to take back again. And all that means spilled blood!'

"I looked at Platon and listened with agitation to every word he said. The old man believed in our victory. To me he was the living and formidable voice of our courageous people.

" 'But you see, our unit was obliged to withdraw,' began the Colonel tentatively.

" 'Rubbish! You simply couldn't fight! That's what I think about your retreat,' said Platon. 'What does it say about war in the Field Regulations? D'you know? It says: If you're aiming at a target, hate what you're aiming at.'

" 'And where's your hate?' asked Savka.

" 'Yes! And you're afraid to die. That means that you haven't any live hatred in you. None at all!' Platon was all but shouting and had stopped rowing.

"We did not know what to answer.

" 'Oh, something's floating down the river. Is it one of ours or a German?' asked Platon as he stretched out his oar to pull in the floating body.

" 'A German. . . . May the cholera get you! You're floating already, are you? . . . Ekh, look where he's got to. The Desna! Managed to do it, the pig. And all you people do is ponder and feel miserable. This is no time for feeling miserable.'

" 'I tell you, Old Man, I hate the Germans with all my soul!' shouted Troyanda, even rising in his seat with the force of his emotion.

" 'Well, that means you've got a small soul,' said Platon. 'There are all sorts of souls, my boy. Some are deep and swift, like the Dnieper, others are like the Desna here, and there is a third sort, that is like a puddle, and sometimes not even a puddle but just a wet spot, like what's left by a bull, if you'll excuse my saying so.'

" 'Well, and what if your soul's big but you're nervous?' said Troyanda taking offence and at the same time angry with himself. He was a witty and resourceful lad, but suddenly he could find nothing to say and all his resourcefulness seemed to have evaporated into thin air.

" 'If you're afraid, you just chain yourself to the machine-gun and let the enemy have it as long as you're alive, without saying a word,' said Platon. 'Leave it to those who remain among the living to decide later what sort of a nervous person you were. Otherwise it comes out that you've got lots of hatred in you, but even more nervousness and love of yourself. That's why you come running: "Take us across, Old Man!" And you waste your hatred on something else. What's it worth if you don't even know how to die?'

" 'Not everyone knows how to do that,' mumbled Troyanda, who hadn't a leg to stand on by now.

" 'That's just the trouble. And everyone should know this when the enemy is pushing. Everyone has to eat bread and knows how. And all that you've learned to do is to wag your tongues.'

" 'Ho-oo, there! Give us a boat! H-e-ey!' came from the shore we had left.

" 'Some more nervous souls hollering away! The Germans can hear them! Can't even wait quietly,' said Savka.

"We continued a while in silence. Platon began to pull hard on his oar. It was obvious that he wanted to say something else, to give vent to his dissatisfaction.

" 'Just imagine, Savka, what Stalin thinks of all this. After all, he depended on them, like I do on my Levko, and here they come with their *Old Man, take us across*!'

" 'Did you hear Comrade Stalin's speech?' asked Troyanda.

" 'No, I didn't,' replied Platon softly and sighed.

" 'Yes,' said Savka, 'just think how many years Stalin has been teaching them, Platon. And they're running. Right now he is saying: *What*, he says, *are you doing*? *Stand firm, don't you dare run*! *The further you run, the more blood will be spilled. And not only your soldier blood, but the blood of mothers and children.* That's the kind of speech he made!'

" 'Comrade Stalin never said that,' declared Troyanda pedantically.

" 'Well, if he didn't, he will,' said Savka. 'What does Stalin say? He says what the people think, that's what he says. . . .'

" 'I don't know how you feel about it, Savka,' said Platon, but, as for me, not only Hitler, but the devil himself couldn't drive me away from the Dnieper or the Desna.'

" 'That's easy said, grand-dad. You should wait until you've seen a tank or two!' began Lieutenant Sokol in justification.

" 'What if I should?' Platon interrupted him, evidently having no desire to hear us out. 'How many times can this here tank kill you? In any case it's you that will have to smash them, not me. I've done my share of fighting in my day. Now take my Levko at Khalkin-Gol, have you heard what he did to those what-do-you-call-'ems? . . . Tanks! . . .' snorted Platon. 'A good stout heart is stronger than any tanks. It always was, is, and will be!'

"I simply couldn't bear to listen to his conversation any longer, so painful was it. He seemed to me at that moment a cruel and unjust old man.

" 'Do you really think, grand-dad, that it isn't hard for us? Do you really think that pain and regret aren't tearing our souls, torturing and searing our hearts with the fires of hell?' I flung at him.

" 'What's there for me to be thinking about?' retorted Platon, looking straight at me. 'Think yourself! Life belongs to you now, not me. I only want to tell you before you leave: you're pouring your drinks from the wrong bottle. What you're drinking, I see, is sorrow and regret. There's no earthly use to that. It's not your drink, my boys. That's drink for the women. What you soldiers have to drink to-day is the strong drink of wrath against the enemy, yes, a fiery rage. That's your drink. Moaning and groaning are not for you. Being sorry eats into a person like a worm. The people who win through are those who are quick to action and in a passionate rage, not those who go around being sorry!' said Platon and lapsed into silence. He had finally given utterance to his thought. That was his right. Stern and handsome, he sat there majestically, staring straight in front of him, over our heads.

"Just then a shell fell not far away, raising a huge spout of water.

" 'Ho! . . . It'll stun the fish!' came Savka's voice.

" 'It'll stun them all right,' said Platon. 'The winter before last they died because of the terrible frosts, couldn't get enough air to breathe. Now the Germans are feeding them with grenades. Everything living in the world, even in the rivers, they're wiping out now. . . . Well, here we are.'

"The boat scraped gently on the river sand. I got out on the bank utterly devoid of feeling and at the same time somehow completely different, new. It was as if the Desna had swallowed up my sorrow, my regret, the desolate despair of the retreat. I looked around me. Great fires were flaring beyond the Desna. And the fiery conflagration somehow lit up my heart in a new way. An intolerable flame fired my whole being. It seemed to me at that instant that if I rushed back to the Desna the very waters would part before me. It's somethng I shall never forget. . . . We began to take our leave of the old men, hastening into the underbrush.

" 'Hold on a minute,' said Platon as he leaned on his oar. 'What do you want us to tell the Germans? How shall we meet them, how look them in the eye?'

" 'Tell them that we shall return. Don't fret, Old Man, we'll come back,' said Troyanda in an endeavour to put heart into him.

"Platon looked right through Troyanda and spat lightly.

" 'Ho-o-o-ho-o-o! He-e-ey, there! Let's have the boat!' came from the other shore.

" 'Goodbye, and thanks,' said my fellow-travellers softly as they plunged into the willow grove.

" 'Get along with you,' said Savka indifferently. Platon said nothing.

"We entered the willow grove. I walked behind the others, thinking of Old Man Platon. Thanks be to him, I thought, that he had no pity upon us, that he did not sprinkle our path with tears, that he struck fire from my heart in the night. . . . Why, I thought the question to myself, are you so bitter and sour at times? And then suddenly I stopped short. Then I turned and ran back to the Desna.

"There was something I had to tell Old Man Platon in farewell. I dashed down to the shore.

"Platon was standing at the water's edge with his oar, like some ancient prophet, motionless, evidently looking after us.

" 'Goodbye, grand-dad. Forgive us for not having safeguarded your old age,' I said choking on the words. 'We shall never . . .'

" 'Beat it! Get out of my sight,' said Platon, not even glancing at me.

"Over his wrinkled, swarthy cheeks the tears coursed and fell into the Desna.

"That, my friends, is all. That is my whole secret," said Captain Kolodub and lit his pipe.

A deep sigh came from the men in the dug-out.

"Now I am a Hero of the Soviet Union. I've done for quite a number of the enemy. Many of them I shot down during attacks and no few I've crushed under caterpillar tracks. There have been times, if you'll believe me, when I've felt nauseated at the crunching of German bones. And I've been in a tight fix myself more than once. But wherever the fighting may be, no matter how the enemy whirlwind may storm around me, nothing can ever extinguish the flame that Old Man Platon once kindled in me in that boat. . . . What do our lives mean? What does our blood mean, when our whole country, our whole people is suffering?" The Captain's voice rang like a tocsin.

"When we are in the fight, it seems as if I have a hundred hands, and my wrath and hatred is multiplied a hundred times over! Fact."

Captain Kolodub laughed shortly.

"And yet there is nothing in life I would like so much as to go to the Desna after the war to see Old Man Platon. . . ."

"And to tell him that he was mistaken, Comrade Hero of the Soviet Union. Good evening, everybody! How're tricks?" came the jaunty voice of Boris Troyanda from the door. He had been standing there for the past half hour.

"And to take my hat off to Old Man Platon for what he taught me," said the Captain as if he had not heard the newcomer.

There was not a sound in the dug-out. No one moved, as if the thoughts of all the tankmen were still far away on the Desna.

"No, Comrade Captain, you won't take your hat off to Old Man Platon," sighed a young tank man.

Everyone turned round to the speaker. It was Ivan Drobot. He was standing in the farthest corner of the dugout. Somehow he seemed to have been particularly moved by the Captain's story.

"Old Man Platon, Comrade Captain, is no longer among the living," said Drobot. "As soon as you went off into the willow grove the Germans came running up. They beat the old man terribly for having ferried you across, and wanted to shoot him, when orders came for them to cross to the other shore immediately. Just a stroke of luck. They crammed into the boat. Old Man Platon rowed them out to the middle of the Desna and then he said: 'Savka, forgive me! May God forgive me.' 'And you forgive me, too, Platon!' Savka said to him. 'And may God forgive me!' At that they suddenly raised their oars, threw themselves to the right and capsized the boat. Everything went down: machine-guns, the Germans and the old men. Only I managed to swim to our shore."

"And who are you?" Captain Kolodub asked softly.

" I am Savka's grandson. I was the one at the second oar."

"Stand!" came the order from Kolodub.

Everyone rose. For a long minute the family of soldiers stood in silence.

The Captain was pale and solemn. He stood with closed eyes. Then slowly he sank to one knee and everyone followed his example.

"Are you ready for battle?" asked Kolodub, and seemed to tower before the men just as Old Man Platon had towered on the Desna bank.

"We are ready for anything!"

Silence filled the dug-out. It was quiet in the trenches too. Only far away on the horizon the bright sword of a searchlight flashed through the sky.

WHITE MITTENS

By V. ILENKOV

★

I

THE white, soft woollen mittens seemed to progress ever so slowly. Every now and then Kuzminichna cast an anxious glance at the clock on the wall. It was already three o'clock and at six the next morning Mitya would be off on his long journey.

The small paraffin table lamp cast a pool of light on the dry nimble fingers, on the gleaming, sparkling knitting needles which flashed in and out, casting on stitch after stitch. The ball of wool which turned and twisted on her lap resembled a white, fluffy little kitten.

Her hair, which was combed back smoothly, was silvery white at the temples. Her thin, beautifully arched lips were pressed tightly together. More and more often Kuzminichna glanced quickly at the clock, and every time a look of concern appeared in her large, kindly eyes—the hands of the clock seemed to be moving, oh, so fast to-day, oh, so fast. For a moment the thought flashed through her mind: perhaps there was something the matter with the clock again, but no, there was the rooster in the yard crowing for the third time already that night, and the rooster was never wrong. . . .

And her nimble fingers worked still more swiftly, deftly. She could not let Mitya go without mittens. A cold piercing October wind whistled mournfully outside the window, shaking the rowan tree which grew there and causing one stiff and bare branch to tap against the glass pane. And it seemed to Kuzminichna that it was Demid who was tapping on the window, Demid, the collective farm stableman, come to say that the horses on which Mitya would be leaving were already harnessed. . . .

From the darkened corner of the room came the quiet, even

breathing of her son. No music ever sounded sweeter in her ear, or was more precious to her than his deep, serene breathing—the sound of life, of life that she had given birth to, nourished, nurtured and safeguarded from, oh, so many ailments. And Kuzminichna reflected with anguish that the minute hand would pass round the clock only another three times and the inexorable, inevitable, cruel moment would come—her son would go away, would go whither many had gone before and from whence so many had not returned.

It had all happened so suddenly, and for this reason, in Kuzminichna's mind, it had taken on the proportions of a calamity—retribution for something she had not at all deserved.

How happy she had been only the evening before: Mitya had come home on a surprise visit from Moscow, looking so jolly, his eyes sparkling with excitement, with something about him that had made him more handsome than ever. And Kuzminichna had realised all of a sudden that before her was no longer a young boy but a grown man, that some change had taken place in her son, something big, eventful.

'He's fallen in love, I suppose,' she had thought to herself, embracing her son. Her hands had fondled his soft, curly, dark brown hair. There he had stood, tall, slightly round-shouldered as his father had been, looking at her and speaking in his gruff, manly voice.

"Well, here I am, mother. . . . What a darling you are. . . ."

He had been too shy to express aloud, in plain ordinary words, the sentiments which filled his heart to overflowing, and had broken off, hugging his mother all the tighter to him, and Kuzminichna, in her turn, had clasped him impulsively to her breast, inhaling the smell of his hair, and of his breath, which smelled of tobacco. And the fact that he had taken up smoking had not aggravated her in the least although, generally, she could not abide the smell of tobacco.

Yes, Mitya was a grown man although he had not yet turned eighteen. He was attending the University now, a student of the Institute of History, Philosophy and Literature. Kuzminichna did not understand what exactly he was studying there. Never-

theless she felt exceedingly proud every time she addressed a letter to her boy: So and So, Student of the Faculty of Philosophy.

To Kuzminichna, who had lived all her life in the country, far away from the busy highways and the big towns, there was a suggestion of the mysterious and inaccessible, but nevertheless elevating, in those words, something that moved her deeply every time she pronounced them. And Mitya understood that it was difficult for his mother to enter into his complex world, and he always strove to speak simply to her, as he would to a child.

"You see, mother dear, philosophy is a special branch of science. It discloses to a person the purpose of his living on the earth. . . ."

"Every person, Mitya dear, lives for his own happiness. I, for instance, live for your sake, darling. . . ."

"That, too, is a philosophy, Mum, but . . . how shall I explain it . . . it's a wrong philosophy. You see, if people only lived for the sake of their own happinesses, who would strive to achieve happiness for all? And so one must live for the sake of all the people, for one's country's sake, for humanity's sake. . . ."

But this was already too deep for her. It followed then that she too, Kuzminichna, an old and semi-literate woman, had a philosophy of her own, but that, in the simplicity of her soul, she had lived on and on without even being aware of it. And now, moreover, it appeared that she had been living not in the way she should have. . ..

Kuzminichna had looked through the window. Beyond it stretched her own dear and accustomed world, in which everything was comprehensible and familiar.

The rowan tree with its heavy clusters of dun-coloured berries made a picturesque scene under the window; a white cock stood perched on one leg on the squat roof of the cellar, which was overgrown with a plush-like carpet of green moss; the wooden bucket over the well swung to and fro in the wind.

All her life had been passed here, under this low-ceilinged roof. On the shelf opposite her stood the white porcelain cup from which Mitya had taken his milk ever since he had been a baby. . .

Kuzminichna had taken down the cup in order to fill it with milk for her son and, suppressing with an effort the dull ache that seemed to contract her heart, had said:

"You know best, Mitya dear. . . . After all, I never had much schooling. You know ever so much more than I do. . . ."

Mitya had gone up to his mother and put his arm round her shoulders just as he always did when he wanted her forgiveness for something he had done.

"I say, Mother dear! . . ." he had blurted out, taking a deep breath, "I say, Mum . . . pack up my things, will you. . . . I have to leave in the morning. . . ."

"Leave . . . in the morning? Where to?"

"Over there, Mum," Mitya had replied, turning away and making a gesture with his arm in the direction of the setting sun.

Kuzminichna's fingers had suddenly become weak and feeble, the cup had fallen to the ground with a crash and shattered into a thousand fragments. But Kuzminichna had not so much as heard the sound, which only a minute ago would have upset her terribly. She had looked at her son in bewilderment, feeling with all her being that something cold had come between them, just as, for example, when ice locks a river in its embrace and, yet, through the thin transparent sheet you can still see the green cups of the water lilies in its depths, giving the impression that there is life there; but as soon as you stretch out your hand, you come up against a barrier of ice—all is frozen, all is dead.

"Mitya . . . Sonny . . . has your year been called up?"

"No. . . . I'm going of my own accord. I volunteered. . . . Mother. . . . Oh, I know how hard it must be for you to listen to all this . . . but do try to understand me. . . . I can't go on. . . . I simply have no right to spend my days studying philosophy at such a time. . . ."

"But you can't . . . you can't go off just like that . . . Mitya dear!" The whispered words had fallen faster and faster from her lips as if it depended on them whether Mitya would go away or stay at home.

"Son . . . Sonny . . . but you really can't. . . . True, you've

grown up, my precious, but I've hardly seen you grow to manhood. . . . Only a while ago you were still quite a youngster. . . . Only last year I remade that jacket of yours . . . and now look at the sleeves, the way you've grown out of it. . . ."

And only then, when she suddenly recalled to mind the striped schoolboy jacket, had the tears welled up in her eyes and begun to stream down her cheeks. Her whole body had shaken convulsively as she had clung desperately to her son.

"I won't let you . . . I won't let you go. . . . Whatever are you thinking of? . . . What will I have to live for? . . . Mitya, darling. . . . Have pity on me in my old age! Have pity on your mother. . . . I never grudged you anything. . . . I sacrificed everything for your sake . . . my health . . . everything down to the last crust. . . . Mitya . . .darling. . . ."

She had looked beseechingly at him, covering his hands with kisses, but Mitya had stood there, his head bowed in sorrow, a strained, far-away look in his eyes, while his thin lips, the copy of his mother's, trembled with pain and anguish.

"I can't dear, I can't, Mum. . . . I gave my word. . . . I signed up in a tank-busting unit. . . . I'll go out to meet the enemy tanks, pelt them with glass grenades. . . . I'll set fire to them. . . . But don't you be afraid for me, Mum. . . ."

He had tried to console her as best as he could, but his hands had been as though weighted with lead and had fondled her hair with clumsy movements. He had hugged her to his breast, seeking, as it were, support and encouragement from her for his tormented soul. And because it was necessary to explain the sublime nature of that which lay beyond the restricted confines of his mother's small world, Mitya had begun to talk loudly, passionately, gesticulating with his hands, throwing back with a toss of his head the dark brown lock of hair on his forehead, just as he was accustomed to do at some public gathering:

"History will never forgive us if we do not achieve victory. . . . We must be prepared to make the supreme sacrifice for the sake of the future of our country, for the future of all mankind. . . ."

She had rushed into his arms, pressing her face against his chest, clinging quiveringly to his warm body, hugging him to her

as though filled with a desire to hide her son somewhere, within her own being, under her heart, so as not to surrender that which constituted her very life, her happiness.

. . . The sparkling knitting needles flashed in and out, quicker and quicker, casting on stitch after stitch. Only the thumb remained to be done. . . . Then she would have to embroider some token on them, because most mittens are alike and he might mislay them or exchange them by chance. And he would not be able to get another pair like these . . . so warm, knitted by his own mother. Distinctive marks would have to be knitted in some bright-coloured wool, big enough to catch the eye at once. Yes . . . the best thing would be to embroider a pine tree in red wool on the back of each hand. . . .

Kuzminichna looked at the red pine trees embroidered on the mittens and pressed her lips to them, whispering fond words such as only a mother can conjure up out of her boundless love.

II

Winter had long held the earth in its embrace. The rowan tree under the window stood covered with a blanket of snow, its heavy clusters of berries unpicked—there was no one for whom to pick the bitterish fruit of which Mitya was so fond. Only of a morning would the magpies flock to the tree and begin one of their noisy squabbles and drop berries on to the snow, where they lay looking for all the world like drops of blood.

For hours at a stretch Kuzminichna would sit at the window gazing towards the west, in the direction her boy had taken, at the setting sun which gleamed cold and bright, illuminating the sky with a tumult of lurid flame as if some conflagration were raging there.

"Mitya, dear . . . my boy . . . my son. . . ." Over and over again, time without number, she whispered the words to herself, longingly, yearningly. And so she spent her days, indifferent to everything that was going on around her. In the meantime the muffled rumble of distant thunder grew ever nearer, folks hastily began to pack up their belongings and leave the village, bent beneath the burden of their sorrow. They begged Kuzminichna

to go away with them, but all to no avail. She did not intend to go anywhere, this was her only reply.

That which was looming nearer held out no fears for her, for she could not conceive the dangers with which it was fraught. She kept on saying to herself:

"Mitya left for the very thick of it. Should I then run away to save my skin? Of course not! I should have gone with him, to face the danger by his side. I would have looked after him there, seen to it that he had something to eat at the right times, washed his things. . . . Why should I run away and hide somewhere. . . . What is the use of my life to me with my Mitya? Perhaps he'll come back and he won't find me here. . . . He'll say: 'My old Mum's run away. . . .'" And she felt a sense of shame for not having left together with her son and shared with him the burdens whch he had shouldered of his own accord.

When the Germans entered the village, the sole living beings in it were Kuzminichna and the white rooster. The children had had orders to round up all the chickens and hide them in the woods, but, chase it as they would, they could not lay hands on the white rooster, which flew up onto the roof out of their reach.

There it stood now, perched on one leg and crowing for all it was worth, proclaiming, as it were, its independence of the ominous events taking place around it. And, listening to its cheerful cry, Kuzminichna felt certain that nothing could shake her small world. The crowing of this white-feathered fowl brought her son to mind. It was thanks to Mitya that the bird was still alive. Kuzminichna had wanted to roast it for Mitya to take with him on the road. She had armed herself with the kitchen knife in order to chop off the bright red, notched cockscomb.

The bird's head had lain submissively on the doorstep, its eyes closed, and the knife had been just about to come down on the outstretched neck when a cock at the other end of the village had begun to crow. In a flash the doomed white-feathered bird had come to life, torn itself free from Kuzminichna's grasp and begun to crow in reply.

This, though, had been no mere answering call, it had sounded more like a song, the song which arouses peasants' children of a

morning, hastens them on their way to school or to drive the cattle out to pasture.

And Mitya, hearing this song, had suddenly recalled the time when he was a little boy. When his mother had been young and slim, with raven-black hair. And a vision of the closely-cropped meadow flooded with sunlight, and of the brindled calf, had risen before his eyes.

"Let it live, Mum," he had said, and she had let the bird out into the yard, given it a generous supply of food, and when its strong beak had begun to peck away at the seeds on the wooden board a smile had played on her lips.

"Let it live," she had echoed his words.

'Maybe this has got something to do with that philosophy of his,' Kuzminichna had thought to herself.

The white rooster was, as it were, a symbol of this life of his: with its comb—filled with red, hot blood, its cry—powerful, ringing, triumphant, its rich coat of feathers—translucent in the rays of the sun like some rare and exquisite porcelain cup.

And so it stood perched now—festival-like—on the roof-top and crowed, while tanks cluttered past down the village street, causing Kuzminichna's house to shake with the din, the window-panes to rattle in the frames and the ice-bound earth to clamour.

Kuzminichna went out into the street. She was afraid to stay in the house—some terrible foreboding weighed heavily on her heart.

"Halt! Halt!"—the order rang out sharp, hateful, malicious.

A man in a threadbare greatcoat with rags tied round his head to cover his ears suddenly appeared in front of Kuzminichna, brandishing a rifle and yelling "Halt!" in his hateful voice, although she stood as though rooted to the ground, looking at the enormous steel monsters lumbering down the village street.

The German went on yelling. Kuzminichna was not accustomed to be shouted at for nothing. Folks always spoke to her in a gentle and quiet tone of voice.

"Stop yelling!" she said sternly to the German and turned away unhurriedly into the yard, a look of contempt on her face for this unkempt ruffian.

The German brought his rifle to his shoulder, took aim at the rooster perched on the roof, and let fly. A white ball tumbled down the slope on to the ground and, struggling to its feet, began to rush about the yard, shedding its feathers like the fragments of a hopelessly smashed porcelain cup. The German dashed about clumsily in his heavy hobnailed boots, trying to catch the the scared bird, which fluttered up to Kuzminichna as though seeking protection from her. Kuzminichna took the rooster in her arms and patted its head soothingly.

"Halt!" the German bellowed at the top of his voice and stretched out his hands to snatch the fowl away. Horror-stricken, Kuzminichna staggered back a step: the German's hands were encased in white woollen mittens with red pine trees embroidered on the back of them.

There could not be another pair of mittens like them anywhere in the world. . . .

The German wrenched the bird from her arms, twisted its neck and, poking her in the chest with his mittened hand, shouted:

"Roast! Roast!"

But he pronounced the word in a way which sounded like gibberish, as though he were barking at her: "Ows! Ows!"

Kuzminichna was deaf and blind to everything, seeing nothing but the white mittens with the red pine trees embroidered on the back.

"My boy. . . . My boy. . . . My poor child," she whispered through blanched lips. Everything went round and round in a maddening whirl, the ground tipped up and fell away from under her feet and Kuzminichna sank into a black abyss in which red pine trees kept up a never-ending dance.

. . . When she came to she felt a dull pain in her side. The German was kicking her with his blunt-nosed hobnailed boot.

"Ows! Ows!" he kept barking at her.

With faltering steps she made her way into the house and built up a fire in the oven. The German plucked the bird, tearing out feathers by the handful. Spittle dripped from his lips and clung to the reddish stubble on his unshaven chin. He snorted

and kept on emitting a rumbling sound which seemed to come from the pit of his stomach.

He could not wait until it was done, but pulled it out of the oven and began to eat it half raw. He tore at the tough meat with his teeth, wagging his head, choking and growling as he gulped it down. He put his flask to his mouth and, smacking his lips, took a long pull at it, after which he attacked the fowl with added frenzy, crushing the bones between his jaws. . . .

'What a beast! A real beast,' thought Kuzminichna to herself. She shut the damper of the stove, omitting to remove the still live coals.

After finishing the fowl the German drove Kuzminichna out of the house, bolted the door and stretched himself out on the bed. Looking in through the window half an hour later, Kuzminichna saw that the German was sprawling on his back, his mouth wide open, a meaningless look in the glazed eyes staring at the ceiling.

Kuzminichna knew that the bolt was loose in the groove. She forced the door open. There was a strong smell of carbon fumes. The mittens lay on a bench. . . .

In the forest depths of my native land, in lairs dug under the roots of giant trees, in the primitive surroundings of our primordial ancestors, live hundreds and thousands of men and women. They have gathered here in these forest retreats from villages and hamlets razed to the ground, from demolished towns and cities, gathered here to fight the enemy until their last breath.

And a legend is current in these woods about a silver-haired woman who bears a charmed life, whom no German bullet can touch, because of a woollen pair of mittens she wears over her heart, magic mittens with red pine trees embroidered on the back of them.

THE LAST NIGHT

By VENYAMIN KAVERIN

★

IT WAS evening when the Commissar asked Kornev and Tumik to come up to his quarters. He spoke to them of a certain German battery—a long-range 130 mm. battery—which kept both the front line and the rear under constant fire and which had got on the nerves of all of them long ago.

"That battery has caused us some pretty heavy losses," he said. "And besides, it is hampering us from carrying out a certain operation. It's got to be destroyed."

Then he asked them what they thought of self-sacrifice, for it could not be destroyed any other way. He did not ask this outright, but first began talking of the twenty-eight young men of the Panfilov[1] unit who had given up their lives for their country. Now a similar job was being put before these two, Kornev and Tumik, as two outstanding scouts, well deserving of their decorations.

Tumik was the first to speak up. "I'll do it for our country's sake," he said quickly. Kornev also agreed unhesitatingly, and it was decided to land them on the shore at 9 o'clock in the morning. Although it was December and the days were as dark as the nights, the Germans usually sent up their rockets only during the night-time.

Time suddenly seemed to hang heavily on their hands, and the men lay thinking back. It seemed all the more impossible not to as this would very probably be the last time they would have the chance.

Tumik had already been on active service a year and a half and had been wounded twice. He had been in Romanenko's

[1] The guardsmen who stopped the tanks on the road to Moscow in 1941.

"Bachelors Detachment," in which only unmarried men had been included. He had taken part in the capture of the famous "Kolpak" mound, which eighty seamen had held for seven hours against two battalions. When their ammunition had given out the sailors had begun to hurl rocks. Laughing and singing their famous song "The Blue Collars" in reckless defiance of death, they had dug up boulders and hurled them at the Germans. They had cast their tin hats aside, and worn on their heads only their sailors' caps. Their utter scorn of death and danger had been something to marvel at.

This time again it was not death he thought of. He had said: "For our country's sake," and that was what his mind dwelt on.

Before the war he had rarely encountered the expression "For our country's sake"—he had met it only in books, and old-fashioned ones at that, where the words were all printed according to the old spelling. He was still a youngster—only twenty-one years old—although this was his fourth year in the fleet. He had learned about the old days and the old way of spelling from his father, and something about it also from the lessons in Russian history at school.

His father had been Commissar of a regiment of the First Cavalry Army,[1] and had been awarded three Military Orders. Every summer big-moustached, greying military men clad in long cavalry coats would visit him at Armavir and sit with him for hours talking and drinking. They would slap each other on the shoulder and say: "Well, brother, how about it!" And later his father would call Kolya and the men with the big moustaches would stare at him silently and try to predict what he would be when he grew up.

It seemed very funny to Tumik now, in retrospect. But he could see the little house as if it were only yesterday, the broken porch step, and his father, thin-nosed, with short, grey hair, still erect and agile, as he strode down the garden to meet his guests, with his three Orders pinned to his breast and his Kuban hat tilted at an angle.

When the war had broken out he had written to Tumik, saying:

[1] Buddeny's Civil War Cavalry.

"Fight for me as well as for yourself." But very likely he himself had also entered the fight when the Germans approached Armavir.

So that was it: For our country's sake. But what, then, was this "country?" He wanted to think of something lofty and high-sounding, to compose a parting letter to his friends, for instance. He even began to write such a letter mentally, but gave it up—the words were the usual ones he had read a thousand and one times in the newspapers.

He would have liked to write beautifully, words like those of "The Blue Collars," so that the boys would remember them and repeat them on similar occasions, when they, too, went to meet their death for their country's sake. But nothing came of his attempts.

Yes, his father. How good it would be to go off with him once more to Batumi, and then give him the slip and run off to the mountains, to Makhinjauri.

And then there was the Armenian girl who worked at the meteorological station and whom he used to meet every evening as if by accident, when she went to register the day's rainfall and temperature. She had called him "Nikhaios," which was the Armenian for Nicholas. He had simply called her Shura. She was slim and dark, with clusters of black curls behind her ears, such a fine girl and very serious. She would lecture him for his wildness and then they would sit down on some old stonework, which at one time had been a Genoese fortress, and kiss.

Beneath them they could see cypress trees, tangerine orchards, tobacco and lavender plantations, and beyond it all, beyond the invisible shore, the sea. Yes, that was worth recollecting. Especially since it was very unlikely that he would ever again have a chance to sit on that masonry and enjoy those long embraces.

So that was what one meant by "country." Where else had things been so nice? On Mount Kazbek. He had climbed Kazbek with Misha Rubin, his friend and classmate of the grammar school and later of the trade school. In 1939 they had joined the fleet together, when the Young Communist League had called

for volunteers. They used to take their skates up to the top of Kazbek and skate on the glaciers—a rather risky but exciting sport. When they had become hot, they would take off everything but their shorts. He had a snapshot back home, that is, if his home was still intact. After skating they would spend the night at the Kazbek restaurant and have long heart-to-heart talks. At that time they seemed to have a thousand lives ahead of them—all they had to do was to choose the best, the most interesting.

And they had chosen—the sea, the Workers' and Peasants' Navy.

So Tumik lay there recalling his whole life, the most vital, most interesting events of his past. His father and the house he was born in, his childhood and school-days, Shura, his first love, and Misha Rubin his chum, who always declared that love was all very fine in its way, but that there was nothing to beat a real, objective friendship. These three—his father, the girl and Misha—had been with him throughout the war, and now they were still with him, as he lay in his berth under the porthole listening to the waves splashing up against the side of the boat.

And suddenly—everything seemed so clear to him that he sat up, his arms locked round his knees.

'I've not lived my life in vain,' he said to himself. 'And if death is to be glorious, so has life been. My friendships, skating on the glaciers, the wonderful nights in Makhinjauri, my pride in Father, with his cane and three Orders. . . .

'What is death? There is no such thing as death—' he went on, listening with amazed rapture to his own words. 'Suppose I do cease to live—my glory will remain, and everyone will know what it was that I gave up all I had, all that was dear and precious to me, to save. And my father will say: "He isn't dead; he'll stay with me to the world's end." And my comrades will say: "He was a brave lad and a good sailor." '

Tumik knew that he ought to go to sleep—at least for an hour, but it was a pity to sleep now that he was in so happy a mood, and he lay there for a while with his eyes open.

He noticed that Kornev was writing a letter by candlelight and he wanted to tell him that for both of them, Tumik and

Kornev, there was no death, that this was a solemn night for them, their last, when all the world stood still and only the slight wind sent the waves splashing over the deck. But he did not say anything. Kornev had a wife and a little boy. He was writing to them, and who knows what he thought as he knit his heavy black brows.

* * *

. . . At the very first glance they realised that they could not simply lay the explosive and go off. The battery was working and far too many people were standing all round it. There was only one thing to do—what the Commissar had said—to blow it and oneself up at the same time. That was easy, for nearby there were huge piles of shells.

They decided to draw lots, because one man would be enough for the job and the other could return to his unit. They agreed that the one to draw the whole match would be the one to go back. Tumik slipped two whole matches into his hand and said in a whisper:

"O.K., Kornev, try your luck!"

Kornev had a wife and small son. Besides that, he had not perhaps thought the matter over so profoundly, and things maybe were not so clear to him.

The men embraced each other and kissed. On parting Tumik gave Kornev a photo of himself with his tommy-gun, lying down and taking aim—the boys said it had come out fine. And then—Kornev left.

He was about forty yards from the battery when he heard the roar of the explosion and saw the flames shoot up into the sky, lighting up the snow and the dark ravines between the cliffs, the wild cliffs of their country.

THREE MEETINGS

By VENYAMIN KAVERIN

★

THE BOMBS dropped very close to us, and the dying fanfare of the "All Clear" still rang in our ears as we rushed to the house which had been hit.

The wind blew stronger, a blizzard rose, and suddenly it seemed as though a gigantic basket of large wet snowflakes had been turned upside down over the city. The snow settled on the books which had tumbled down from the fifth floor, where an American bookcase could still be seen hanging out on its side. The snow covered the debris of smashed furniture, out of which jutted the wet top of a grand piano. The snow clung to the large blue flowers of the wallpaper in one of the half-wrecked rooms. It was very strange to see snow falling straight into the rooms and collecting on the blankets, pillows, and books lying there on the ground, uncovered, exposed to the weather.

And suddenly came the sound of a voice: "Left! Left!" and the tramp of marching feet close by, followed by the command "Halt!" A moment later a number of youngsters in grey overalls rushed to the wrecked house as if to assault it. They were members of a detachment of the Young Communist League fire brigade, boys from high school, trade schools, young factory workers, University students.

A tall, lanky fellow of eighteen in a white Cossack hat with straps all over him, and a large compass in his hand, was in command.

The others ran up to him, and drew themselves up in military fashion, their hands raised in salute, while he stood on a pile of broken furniture as on a captain's bridge and gave his orders.

It was all like a dream—the blizzard, the crumbling house,

instantly covered with the whirling, swirling, veering snow, and these boys, this whirlwind of young energy which had suddenly broken into the grim scene of misfortune and destruction.

The basement shelter was unearthed and the young man in the Cossack hat jumped down from his captain's bridge and dived somewhere under the ground. A minute later he reappeared with a withered little old man in his arms, carrying him like a child. A hollow murmur of voices came from the shelter as people began to come out, pale, and wet to their waists, for water had flooded the basement. But all were alive, except for the little old man, who lay there motionless on the ground, his grey beard pointing upwards. Falling plaster and stone had evidently smothered him, and of all the people there, only the young fellow in the white Cossack hat seemed reluctant to accept the verdict as final. He unbuttoned the old man's jacket and put his ear to his breast. Perhaps he detected a faint beating of the heart. At all events he straightened up and called imperatively for water. Then he carefully lifted the old man's arms. Then again, and then, just as carefully, a third time.

The crowd that had gathered knew the old man. He was a well-known professor of chemistry, who had evacuated his family but had insisted on remaining in Leningrad himself. The doctor had already come, tired and worn out, and declared that the professor was as good as dead. Then he said:

"Well, let's give him a chance!" and he gave him an injection followed by a second and then a third.

The inhabitants of the wrecked house found temporary shelter with their neighbours. The militia set up a guard over the building and only the group of Komsomols remained, fussing among the crumbling walls, while the young man with the white Cossack hat still remained with the old professor. He had long since thrown aside his hat and unbuttoned his collar. Beads of sweat trickled down his face, which was pale, set, angry. He worked passionately. He seemed to be at grips with Death herself, and she sometimes retreated before this insane youth, sometimes advanced. Suddenly the dead, still face seemed to move. The eyelids quivered and the doctor, who had been

sitting, downcast, on a wet, broken sofa, rushed up to the old man. . . .

Such was Petya Kurkov when I first met him. I knew nothing of him then. But his image remained deeply impressed on my memory, the image of a lad who refused to give in to Death, but who battled against him with all the obstinacy and energy of youth.

* * *

A month passed, and we met again. . . . Those were the days when the giant war plants were moving east along all the railway lines of the country. We waited at a small railway station for a whole day as lathes went by us without end, machines which it seemed would take years and years to assemble and put into operation. I went in search of some water, and stopped near one of the freight cars. The door was ajar, and a square of light fell across the sleepers. There was shouting and laughing in the car. Someone was arguing, and suddenly a high-pitched voice began to sing. I remember only two lines, the end of the refrain:

"So long, girls, but let us know
How the Far East greeted you."

I do not know why, but somehow I suddenly recalled that night in Leningrad. The station was dark and quiet, not a star in the sky. Even the war seemed to have hidden itself away somewhere in the dark, although at the same time it was present everywhere—in that clear young voice and in the faint glimmer of the green and red signals. The song came to an end; someone jumped out of the freight car, and a white Cossack hat flashed by. It was he. We got to talking and an hour later I knew all about him—an unusual and yet quite ordinary life.

He had been left with but one parent at thirteen; his father, a flyer, had been killed in an air crash, and within three months his mother had married again. Petya had been terribly set against her second husband. The death of his father, whom he adored, had come as a severe blow, and now a stranger had intruded into his life. For this reason he kept referring to the man as "that fellow." Perhaps "that fellow" had not really been so bad after all. But he had been a clerk in a savings bank. handed his wife a

very precise amount of money every day, and seemed to have resented part of it being spent on Petya.

"Well, then I left school," Petya said to me, "and began to work at a plant. I was all the keener to, because I wasn't doing so well in my studies." At first he had worked as a mechanic's apprentice, then he had become a qualified mechanic himself. He had wanted to be a pilot like his father, and before the war he had attended night school in order to round off his secondary education and enter an aviation school. So he told me his story—and as he spoke I was struck by his youthful charm. I liked the way he spoke about his father and the way he would break into a nonchalant whistle to conceal his growing excitement. What a splendid, slender youngster he was, erect as when I had seen him in Leningrad, with all those straps on him, his big compass on his wrist and his Cossack hat set jauntily on the back of his head.

And so we walked and talked until it grew light, and we suddenly heard a child's voice calling from somewhere quite near: "Mummy!" We went round the train and saw in the dim morning light a tiny child standing on the track. We were half a mile from the station. There was a lot of snow about, and the countryside all round was bleak and desolate. The child, a little girl about three years old, in a fur hat, winter coat, and muff, did not cry. She merely repeated quietly from time to time: "Mummy!"

"And where is your mother?" Petya asked, squatting on his heels beside her. The child was silent. Then she said that her name was Lucy Vorontsova and her address: No. 23 Red Fleet Embankment, Flat 4. But that was far away. A few minutes later we had taken her to the military commandant. Commanders in transit, in trench coats dirty from the front, and with tired faces coarsened by the wind, surrounded the little girl, and listened to her telling the same story of her name and where she lived. . . .

Our trains remained at the station another six hours—mine pulled out first—and we spent those six hours looking for Lucy's mother. The commandant suggested turning the child over to the District Department of Education. We went there, but Lucy

sobbed so bitterly when she saw the stout "auntie" there, who sternly told her "No crying, Miss!" that Petya suddenly caught up the child and went out. I followed him.

Then we offered Lucy some food. She ate a piece of chocolate in a very business-like fashion and succeeded in smearing her whole face with it. Then she fell asleep in Petya's arms, and it was quite clear that she and her muff, in which lay her naked doll, and a piece of Leningrad bread, could not be left alone.

But what was to be done? Petya and I were travelling in different directions—he with his plant to the East, I to the West. "Suppose I took her with me?" Petya asked me seriously.

I didn't get a chance to reply. The station suddenly became alive, a friend of mine in the Red Cross ran by, waving some papers, and my V.S.P. engine gave a sudden jerk, as a V.S.P. always does. I dashed off and jumped up on the step of the train. Petya shouted: "So long, we'll meet again!" and wanted to raise his hand, but his hands were full and he could only nod his head. He stood there, tall, with straps all over him, looking at the sleeping child in his arms with a bewildered expression—and that was the last I saw of him as we slowly glided away.

* * *

Three more months rushed by of a winter which I shall never forget as long as I live, a winter which shook the world with the roar of our tanks at Moscow, and the clanging of our hammers in Siberia, where our people were assembling plants under the open sky in weather that reached 40° C. below zero. My paper asked me to write up a young Stakhanovite—I was living in one of the big industrial centres of the Urals. My interview took me to a war plant outside the city.

"We'll introduce you to Mosashvili," the Secretary of the Party Committee said to me, "or maybe to Chapay. Shall we introduce him to Chapay?" he said, turning to a foreman who had come in on business bent and was patiently waiting for us to finish our conversation.

"Chapay's O.K., a clever lad," the man said.

"Clever lad? He's a real live wire, a regular dare-devil. You'll see for yourself—full of life! That's important for a writer!"

He rang and in a quarter of an hour Petya Kurkov appeared.

I don't remember what we talked about in the first few moments of our conversation. But then I asked him: "Why Chapay?" and he laughed and said: "Oh, the fellows call me that because of my Cossack hat." As I listened to his rather disconnected tale, I thought that he did indeed resemble Chapayev,[1] except for the fact that he was clean-shaven. He had the same daring and frankness in his eyes, the same tenacious, energetic set of the head and shoulders. He told me of his work, how difficult it had been at first, because all the staff had to be reorganised and some of the old-timers who had worked at the plant for many years were disgruntled at the changes. How, when studying the long trip made by a piece of metal before reaching his brigade, he had hit upon the simple idea of transferring the attachment of an important part from the lathe operators to the mechanics, and how this innovation had effected a saving of hundreds of thousands of rubles and cut the production process in half.

"And Lucy—remember—what happened to her?"

"I looked for her mother at every station," Petya said, "but couldn't find her. She must have died on the way. I wrote to Leningrad, to Red Fleet Embankment. But no reply."

"And where is Lucy?"

"With me. That is—not exactly with me," Petya added, blushing a little. "One of our girls has taken charge of her. In the same house where I live. Drop in, why don't you?"

I promised him to do so and left.

He lived near the plant, in a new house on a street for which the town council had not yet apparently found a name, and for some time I blundered about the backyards, heaped with piles of building material. Suddenly the high spacious bank of the Kama River opened up before me. I came out on the bank and there I saw Lucy. That night she had been in a winter coat. Now she had on a light dress and—perhaps it was not Lucy after all? She was standing near a bench, earnestly wrapping her baby doll. On the bench, reading, sat a plump, rosy-cheeked girl with two quaint short plaits.

[1] Guerrilla leader in the Civil War.

"Lucy!"

Both of them raised their eyes, grave and surprised. . . .

Petya came along half an hour later, by which time I had gleaned a complete account of Lucy's life. It was a very good account. Except that, for some reason, the girl with the plaits did not seem to count for much, because Petya did most of the caring for Lucy. But when I looked at Lena Svetach—that was her name—I thought I understood why Petya had blushed when he had mentioned her during our conversation in the Party Committee room.

Then she left—it was time for Lucy to go to bed—and Petya and I walked up and down the embankment until late in the evening and smoked. He told me that Lena, too, was a new arrival there—from Kiev, that she, too, was all alone, as he and Lucy were. Then he suddenly added naively: "Nice girl, isn't she?"

A large barge with a raft behind it slowly made its way up the Kama, the sun had gone down and the sunset bespoke a gusty morrow. We talked of Petya's brigade, of the factory dining-room, of the fact that the nights here in June were only slightly darker than in Leningrad.

From time to time, when words failed him, he would make a short energetic movement with his hands, and I watched those young, hardened hands with the lines of machine oil that had eaten into them, hands which had brought back life to an old professor that night in besieged Leningrad, hands that had carefully held the sleeping little girl who had lost her mother on the railways of war-rocked Russia. We spoke of very simple things, but other words, other thoughts were in my mind. And I returned to those thoughts as we walked the streets of the city in the quiet night. The life of this youth, still almost a boy, passed before me and in his firm tread, the tread of a whole generation, I saw, for the first time, the mighty results of the war. The fragments of scattered families were being pieced together and new families were being formed. Following on the heels of grief comes happiness: people are finding each other, and wonderful hopes glow in the eyes of youth.

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